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TRANSVERSIONS



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other realities. Your guides
on this chapter of your journey include:
Michael Coney, Ursula Pflug,
Tom Piccirilli & Sue Storm

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TRANSVERSIONS

#6



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FRONT COVER -

"As the Westward Winds
Were Waning...the Lady of Shalott"

by Lorri McMullen

(a homage to Tennyson & Waterhouse)



Editorial by Sally McBride

Change can be defined as transformation, conversion (put 'em together and they spell TransVersion), mutation, metamorphosis – words that conjure up fantastical images and speculations. Change, as they say, is the only constant, and to be afraid of it is to be afraid of life itself.

Change happens here at *TransVersions* too. We started with a pretty clear idea of what we wanted to do, but that picture transformed as time passed and we came up with new ideas, and got feedback from our readers. The magazine mutated a bit, grew in size, changed fonts and typesizes. We've always had lots of short fiction and poetry, but we've also run a letters-to-the-editors column, an author profile (with this year's Nebula winner, Canada's own Rob Sawyer), a novel excerpt, movie reviews and now book reviews. These sorts of morsels liven the stew; besides, we like to read them ourselves in other magazines, so why not try them out here? So far they've been popular variations. Sometimes you just don't feel like sinking your teeth into a challenging work of prose or poetry, preferring to ease into a magazine via smaller nibbles of short non-fiction.

Science fiction is all about change. "What if?" and "If this goes on. . ." are the two big jumping off points into the literature of the fantastic, and can fling a willing reader into far-off realms of wonder. That's why we love the stuff.

We hope you'll find much to your taste in our pages.



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Editorial by Dale L. Sproule

The literary/genre marketplace has never been stable, but the rapid and fundamental change it is currently undergoing has made it stranger and more unstable than ever. Literature and publishing are undergoing major upheavals and fragmentation. Distributors are failing, despite their seemingly exorbitant percentage of the hard-costs of books and magazines. There are too many good writers and not nearly enough decent markets for their work. Markets and publishers are coming and going like restless chimaera.

What is happening? Merely the inevitable – ninety per cent of the traditional audience has been bled off into either mass media or web culture or both. Granted, the remaining fragment remains stubbornly and steadfastly in the hard-copy camp, but don't kid yourself, the audience for books and magazines is only a tiny shard and the sliver that represents sf, fantasy and horror readers is even smaller. In a world where a tv series drawing only seven million people can be cancelled for low ratings, the most successful magazines have circulations of less than 100 thousand. Readers of fantastic literature have become a cult within a cult. They are thinly spread and devilishly hard to reach.

The web seems like the perfect solution – a gathering place for a potentially huge and diverse audience. After all, thousands more people have seen our web page than have read our magazine.

But the Web is undergoing severe growing pains: many people still don't own computers, and a significant percentage of those who do are loathe to read for pleasure on-screen (or to spend their own time and money printing out a hardcopy); and then, there's the fact that a web economy hasn't yet started to gel, so on-line magazines get little or no return for their investment and most go under quickly.

I'm sure that within a generation, all these problems will solve themselves quite naturally and satisfactorily. It's the chaotic period between now and the future of publishing that has me worried. On that note, we'd like to thank all of our supporters who have made it possible to come this far. The journey has just begun, but with your help, we hope to be around for a long time. ❖

Special thanks to our poetry editor, Phyllis Gotlieb, our advisor/copy editor, Gerry Truscott and our webmeister, Jason Harlow. Check our web page at: <http://www.astro.psu.edu/users/harlow/transversions>. Our site contains links to many other great pages including *SFCanada*, *Omni*, *Century*, *Tangent* and *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery*.

MICHAEL CONEY

SHOUT



Illustration © 1996 by Kenneth McCool

OF THE

STORM RIDERS

We're pleased to present the definitive "Amazing, Boy's Adventure Story for Grown-ups" by the inimitable Michael Coney. Mike just turned in his 19th book to his agent; *I Remember Pallahaxi* is a sequel to his popular novel, *Pallahaxi Tide* (aka: *Rax*). Watch for his short story "Catnap" in *Alfred Hitchcock's*. Other notes: he sold his publishing company, Porthole Press, and bought a flock of tiny sheep for his model railway. The two accomplishments are unrelated, but the sheep may have something to do with the ones in his *F&SF* story "A Werewolf in Sheep's Clothing." He would not admit to owning a toy werewolf.

How we admire the Storm Riders!

The whole True Human population of Bellatrix Six looks up to them, figuratively and literally. On the days of high summer when the vast cumulonimbus clouds roll in ten kilometres high, the kids leave the Dome and pole their rafts down the river toward the Tower and the sea, yelling and cheering as the Riders zoom and bank and loop among the cliffs of foamy white.

Are those kids always hoping, subconsciously, for a spectacular crash? I hope not; even in our low gravity, a crash from that height is certain death.

But when we admire people so much, we sometimes secretly want them brought down to our own level. The Storm Riders are an elite band of brothers and sisters, with their Guild and their rites and their secrets – and their Shout. We're excluded, we ordinary colonists. Maybe we want in.

Want in? We don't have the courage to do what the Riders do in their flimsy gliders – they don't use parachutes, which would be considered gutless, unRiderly. We don't have the courage to ride the storm clouds over the sea and radio data back to the Franklin Tower. All we can do is fly in imagination, watching from the safety of the glassy Dome – or in my case the Franklin Tower – unconsciously twisting our bodies in sympathy with the gyrations of the frail craft up there. The Riders' job is done by the time they're over the Dome so they always put on a show for people, vying with one another for popularity. There are speakers in the public places, so the colonists can hear them Shout.

It's unearthly, the Shout of the Storm Riders. I hear it better than most, through the radio in my Tower. It's exultation, it's triumph, it's joy, and it can't be expressed in normal human terms. It's surreal, and it gives you a curious lift just to hear it. People think it has to do with the thrill of dodging the fearsome lightning that stabs about the cumulonimbus clouds. The thrill of cheating death.

I guess we envy the Riders.

Maybe we even envy the dead ones: Jason, who lost a wing to a cloud-devil. Eurydice, who pulled out of a dive too late. Perseus, who simply disappeared over the Western Ocean one winter evening. Many others, over the centuries. Gods and goddesses, but still True Humans.

I've rubbed shoulders with the great. More than shoulders, if you want the truth.

But I lost Atalanta, my great love, soon after Eurydice died.



Eurydice? The Franklin Tower radio came alive and crackling with her voice one summer morning.

"A big thunderhead forming in Sector G, Jack. Real big." She was not exaggerating; I could hardly make out her words for the static. "I'll call him *Tom*," she said. I ask the Riders to give the clouds short names; they have to be repeated many times in reports.

I called Atalanta and the other Riders and told them I'd take on *Tom*. It was my decision as Keeper of the Tower – and it led to Eurydice's death. It's one of those things you start thinking about in the middle of the night when sleep won't come.

There were eleven gliders scattered over the Western Ocean that morning, riding the updrafts from the warming waters. It's not only the sun that warms the ocean out there; submarine volcanic activity causes great upwellings of hot water too. The Riders stopped relaying their instruments' readings back to me and began to play with their clouds instead, just having fun.

Tom came rolling in, filling the gap between the cliffs. Yugu and I went up to the balcony.

"He's big," said Yugu in his rumbling voice. Yugu is not a True Human; he's a Specialist, with gorilla genes. He's strong, knowledgeable and reliable, and he's been here for years. He's seen five Keepers come and go. Mostly he keeps the records and looks after the underground banks of accumulators. He's expert at gauging the power of a cloud and distributing its hellish electrical charge without burning out our equipment.

"Eurydice's in there somewhere," I said.

Yugu heard the worry in my voice. "She knows what she's doing."

"All the same." I hesitated. *Tom* came on, slow and boiling and relentless, his base flat and black. Maybe I had a premonition. *Tom* scared me, and I took a short stroll around the balcony to recover my composure. I hadn't been on the job long enough to become blasé about big clouds. The power in there is unimaginable.

From the opposite side of the Tower I could see the Dome glittering twenty kilometres away like a glass button sewn into the sleeve of the delta. The delta is some ten kilometres wide at that point, and the three-kilometre-high cliffs rise sheer from the valley on either side. With cliffs like that the Dome's day is short, which is why we derive our power from the clouds instead of the sun. But the cliffs have a plus. They tend to funnel the cumulonimbus clouds over the Franklin Tower.

Today a few clouds had passed already and were dumping their rain further up the valley beyond the Dome. I'd let them go, once I knew *Tom* was on his way.

Tom was rumbling like an old man's stomach. I heard Yugu shout, "Hurry up, Jack, for God's sake! We're going to miss him!"

And at that moment I realized I wanted to miss him.

I strolled back, trying to appear nonchalant, and climbed into my insulating suit. Our suits are big, heavy and almost impervious to heat and electricity. Yugu was already suited up, which made him look monstrous. He had his ancient theodolite trained on *Tom*'s base, waiting for the moment when the cloud's shadow fell across a rock out in the ocean that he alone could identify.

"Sixteen hundred metres," he said. "Give or take."

"We'll just tickle his tummy a bit," I said. "No point in digging in too far and blowing the fuses."

Tom loomed up twenty kilometres high, a monster right out of one of my nightmares. I gulped involuntarily and punched in the altitude with a finger that trembled. One day, I told myself, we'll take on too much.

The Tower groaned.

The Piston rose above the balcony, slowly, smoothly rising into the sky, gleaming with that glorious sheen that only polished copper has, probing toward the underbelly of the monstrous cloud. A gust of wind brought a slanting of sleet. Internal flashes caused *Tom* to luminesce, and he rumbled menacingly. I saw the fibers on Yugu's suit rise with the induced positive charge.

It was time to get out of there.

Keepers have been struck on the balcony, hypnotized by the sight of the Piston rising into a cloud base. Some Keepers, drunk with a suicidal ecstasy, have actually ridden the Piston up without a suit on. Yugu and I had not reached that stage, but we seemed to leave our departure later every time. I dragged open the door and we clattered awkwardly down the zig-zag staircase to the quarters below.

"Left it late, didn't you?" Yugu panted.

I heard Eurydice's Shout over the radio, an exultant ululation like a wolf.

The Tower quivered. I watched the metres jump, felt my skin tingle. *Tom* discharged violently, but we'd been ready for him. No damage.

"Look!" shouted Yugu.

I joined him at the observation bubble. *Tom* crept overhead. A storm-glider was plunging out of the blackness. Eurydice. I caught a glimpse of

her as she swept past. Pretty, dark-haired woman; but at that moment her face looked old.

"Storm-devil," said Yugu.

It dived after her like a hawk. It was a big one, maybe three metres across, almost spherical, rotating slowly, shedding sparks like a waved brand. Eurydice flung her glider about as she dived, veering and banking and trying to throw the storm-devil off, but always losing height. I zoomed the bubble as she fell away, bringing her into close-up again. The storm-devil was within five metres of her tail assembly.

"It'll get her," said Yugu.

I wished he'd shut up. I'd bought Eurydice a drink in the Dancing Giraffe only two nights ago. We'd enjoyed a friendly chat. I remembered her eyes as she looked at me over the rim of her glass. Blue and faraway, as though she were still among the clouds. Like all Riders, she lived for gliding.

I said firmly, "She'll pull out of it suddenly and the positive charge will draw the devil into the ground."

"There's no positive charge," said Yugu flatly. "*Tom's* discharged. You felt it. It's over."

The devil reached Eurydice as she hauled back on her stick. It consumed her tailplane immediately, and she flew straight into the mud of the delta.



The Franklin Tower is a tube of reinforced concrete one kilometre high. With our low gravity, this means a cumulonimbus passes a minimum of half a kilometre above us. Running up the centre of the Tower is the Piston, a huge copper rod with a diameter of fifty metres. I mentioned the concrete of the tube is reinforced; well, this is in the form of electrical windings.

You see what we have here? The Franklin Tower is a gigantic solenoid.

I'm by way of being an honorary member of the Storm Riders' Guild as Keeper of the Tower, the forty-seventh in a long line of Keepers. Although I've only been on the job six standard months, I'm a man to be reckoned with when I step into any one of the twenty-odd bars in the Dome, the only town on our little world of Bellatrix Six.

There was silence and mourning in the Dancing Giraffe the evening of Eurydice's death.

Seventeen Riders sat in a group drinking quietly, watched covertly by fifty or so True Humans and a handful of Specialists. One Rider sat alone. It was Atalanta, and she was crying mutely.

I sat at her table. After all, I'm almost the Riders' equal. I said, "I'm terribly sorry."

She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. "It's the risk we take."

Atalanta is tall with thick jet-black hair falling to her shoulders. She keeps herself in good shape; she has strong features with a firm square chin and a straight nose. Some think her mannish. It was all wrong for her to be crying.

I said, "There must be times when you wonder if it's worth it."

Dark blue eyes looked at me for the first time. "It's always worth it. You wouldn't understand. I've lost a friend, that's all. It could happen any time. It'll happen again, and it might be me next time."

Her words made me very conscious of the gap between our philosophies. I wondered whether to leave her and sit somewhere else, then decided to try another line. "Tell me about Eurydice. You were very close to her?"

The dark eyes flashed a challenge. "Very close."

Homosexuality is discouraged in the colonies; the emphasis is all on procreation. Going forth and multiplying. I'd admired Atalanta for a long time; fancied her, if you like to put it that way. I didn't want to think she was a lesbian. "So tell me about her," I repeated. "I never knew her very well."

She was watching my face, trying to read it. "I saw you drinking with her the other night." She shrugged. "Eurydice was a lovely person. We roomed together. I'm not sure how I can face going home tonight. She. . . always prepared the food, that kind of thing. I kept the place tidy. There'll be no supper on the table tonight." She said this last almost flippantly, as though it was the worst of her problems.

We knew each other well enough, we'd talked often and I know she'd guessed my feelings for her. Even so, I was taking a hell of a risk when I said, "Spend the night at my place."

She just looked at me, nothing more.

"Listen," I went on quickly, "I'm not asking you to sleep with me. That would be a pretty crude thing to do, in the circumstances. I mean I'll fix us something to eat while you watch the 3V, or I can dial instant, if you can eat that stuff. Then you sleep in my bed and I use the chesterfield. That way you're not alone tonight."

"Jack, you're a fool."

"I know."

"No, you don't know. You don't know the ultimate degree of your stupidity. But it's not for me to enlighten you. You mean all this kindly. Thanks. I'll come home with you. Let's get out now, before I stand up and make a speech to all those people staring at me."

My apartment is a penthouse with a transparent roof. After we'd eaten, Atalanta and I lay back and watched the stars through the Dome. A lone Rider flew up there, catching the winds from the cliffs and swooping low overhead with illuminated wings. Around us the night life of the Dome went on, sustained by the accumulators under the Franklin Tower. It made me feel indispensable, all those people dependent on me. I held Atalanta's hand as we talked.

"Will you fly again?"

"Of course." She was surprised. "I'm a Storm Rider. You wouldn't understand."

You wouldn't understand. They always say that. And I always find it patronizing. As though they have wonderful secrets that we can't fathom out – not because they're baffling, but because we're too stupid. It's all part of their mystique.

And now I know the truth, I can hardly believe it's so simple.

But I didn't know it then, and I found myself thinking about her and Eurydice in their rooms. In their bedroom. In bed. My God, I was jealous. And in the way of a jealous person, I sought to destroy what tenuous joy I had.

"It's no business of mine," I said, "and I don't hold any particular views on the subject. But was Eurydice your lover?"

And, of course, I lost what progress I'd made, and she pulled her hand away from mine.

"As I said," her voice like the ice-crystals in the base of a cloud, "you wouldn't understand."

We went to bed soon afterward. At least, she went to bed, and I to the chesterfield.

Around midnight I heard her calling me, and I went to her. She was crying and she just wanted me to hold her; nothing more. And that was all we did. Just before she finally went to sleep, she whispered, "Thank you."

I was still awake when the big bright morning star appeared in the west. It's a local phenomenon just twenty kilometres away: the sun's first rays striking the tip of the Franklin Tower.



Only a week later I finally lost Atalanta.

Yugu and I stood on the balcony watching the clouds roll in. A big one was passing overhead in a flurry of rain but we'd decided not to drain it; Atalanta had earmarked a better one further out. One good cloud a day is enough to keep the Dome in power; anything more and we risk overload.

Eight other Storm Riders were out there. I heard the occasional Shout as they played with their clouds.

A storm devil came sneaking out of the next cloud. It hovered just beyond the balcony, a whirling sphere of electricity. People used to call such things ball lightning, back on Old Earth.

But here on Bellatrix Six the storm devils are sentient. They've worked out what the Franklin Tower is for, and they resent us for it. In effect we kill them when we drain the negative charge from their clouds. This storm devil was watching us, wondering if we'd be unwary enough to let it catch us.

We moved close to the door, ready to beat a quick retreat. "Have you ever wondered how they reproduce?" asked Yugu.

I stared at him. Specialists don't often talk about reproduction. Their genes have been so engineered that no two Specialists on Bellatrix Six are sufficiently compatible to bear fertile offspring. This may sound cruel to people on Earth, but you must remember that we create each Specialist for a purpose. Indiscriminate breeding would defeat this purpose and overload our resources. There! I've offended you.

Embarrassed, I took refuge in airing my knowledge. "They just split off. Asexual reproduction. The new one goes to a different charge centre within the cloud, or even another cloud. That's when we see sheet lightning."

"Yes, but why do they split off? What prompts them to do it?"

"Maybe they know they're getting too big."

Yugu smiled, watching the devil warily. "I don't mind talking about it, Jack. You True Humans are the ones who worry about Specialists being sterile, not us. We each have our job, and that's what we love doing. We're born to it, if you like. There's nothing I'd rather do than be up here on the balcony with you, talking about the clouds. I don't want to surround myself with a brood of little Assistant Keepers. What would be the good of that?"

"All right, so what's all this got to do with storm devils reproducing?"

His big face watched me seriously. "You've never stayed out here without a suit when the lightning's about, have you?"

"I'm not that kind of a fool."

"And yet the last five Keepers all died that way. I know, I served them. Two of them stood on the balcony while the cloud was flickering with sheet lightning, three rode the Piston up."

"All right, tell me why." I was skeptical. I didn't have the slightest desire to die. Mind you, I hadn't been Keeper for long. Maybe it gets to you.

"Come on down," he said suddenly, taking my arm in his huge paw. He almost hustled me through the door. The storm devil had retreated into its cloud.

Atalanta's voice came over the radio. "Maybe three kilometres out, Jack. I'm next in line; I have you in sight. You'll be safe to go up top again in a minute; that last cloud's not doing much. But this one's a biggie. The biggest this summer. Tell Yugu to spread the load as wide as he can."

Then she uttered a Shout. "Woweeee! Wow!" And I visualized her catching a sudden updraft and being flung spiraling into the blue. "Oh, wow," she murmured after a moment, regaining control.

I wanted to see her up there. I wanted to see her glider tossing in the currents, to imagine her skilful hands on the controls, to imagine her body twisting and shifting in the harness. I wanted to be with her in spirit.

"I'm going up top again," I told Yugu.

"She won't be here for half an hour yet," he said, grinning. He knows how I feel about Atalanta.

"You don't have to come."

"I'll get the paths set up. I'll see you later."

I climbed back to the balcony. Now that the previous cloud was past, Atalanta's cumulonimbus, *Maeve*, seemed to fill the whole sky. *Maeve* glowed and pulsed, and I began to fear that she would discharge before she reached the Tower. Then I saw the glider, a tiny letter T, slide down an almost sheer precipice as a skier might. I saw another internal flash and heard Atalanta Shout again as she pulled her glider into a tight loop. I felt an odd tingle too, an almost physical excitement tugging at my nerve endings.

For the next twenty minutes Atalanta entertained both herself and me, with a breathtaking series of manoeuvres that took her from the summit of *Maeve* to the base and back. Her Shout rang out over the radio again and again. Her elation affected me, and I found myself shouting too.

I became aware of Yugu watching me with a sardonic eye. "You're wasting your time, Jack."

This brought me down to earth, metaphorically speaking. *Maeve* loomed close. Atalanta swept past the tower, using her momentum to climb back into the cloud base and catch another updraft.

I was just thinking those gliders needed to be very strongly constructed, when Atalanta screamed.

It was not a Shout. It was a scream of pure terror.

I ran to the radio. "What happened?"

"Jack. . . . Oh, my God. Jack!"

“Take it easy. Relax and tell me.”

Her voice was strained. “I’ve . . . lost part of a wing. It just snapped off.”

“Do you still have control?”

“No, I’m . . . Ugh. I’m . . . in an updraft. It’s tumbling me over. I’m not losing altitude, not yet. God, Jack, what am I going to do?”

I stared helplessly at Yugu. “Is there any way we can help?” There wasn’t, of course.

And all Atalanta herself could do, was to stay in the updrafts for as long as she could. Then the cloud would rain itself out in the delta and she’d fall to the ground like a shot bird. Fluttering, trailing bits of broken structure. I could see it in my mind’s eye.

“We’ve got do something!” I shouted, moved to urgency by Yugu’s lack of response.

“Of course we want to, but that’s up to you, Jack.” There was a quizzical look on that broad face. “Think about it. What’s unrequited love worth?”

Suddenly I knew what he meant, but he wasn’t going to say it. I had no choice.

I had to ride the Piston up into the cloud.



It was just the faintest of chances. If we elevated the Piston to its full extent it would be well inside *Maeve*, at a level where we might expect updrafts to begin. And so it would be possible, at least in theory, for Atalanta to drop through the cloud, slide into one of those updrafts and alight on the flat top of the Piston. Well, actually, it was impossible. But it was the only chance she had. And the Piston is only fifty metres across. It would be like trying to catch a falling leaf on an upturned wine glass, in a gale. About like that, I’d say.

“We’ll suit you up,” said Yugu. . . .

The worst thing was the wind. It tore at me as the Piston rose, so that almost immediately I found myself taking involuntary shuffling steps toward the brink. I threw myself to the shiny-smooth copper surface and heard myself yell with fear. I swore that if I survived this, I’d have a guard-rail put around the perimeter of the Piston. It was only later that common sense told me a guard-rail would melt with the power of a cloud’s discharge.

“You all right?” Yugu’s voice sounded in my ear.

I pulled myself together. “It’s okay. A bit slippery, that’s all. Atalanta? How are you doing up there?”

“Still here.” She sounded calm enough, anyway.

"We're bringing the Piston up for you." I was crawling now, making for the windward side, buying centimetres in case of another slide. Fine, so long as the wind didn't shift.

The surface of the Piston would normally have been pitted and easier to grip. It was my bad luck that a crew had been working on it yesterday, grinding it smooth to present the most conductive surface. Rain lashed down, flowing across the copper in waves. I reached the edge, hooked my gloved fingers over. I looked up. Just for a second, the whole planet seemed to whirl around me.

The base of *Maeve* was close overhead. Dim flashes showed behind the dark fog, but the helmet blocked out the thunder's roar. Wisps of mist whirled by. I tried not to think of the hellish drop beyond my fingertips. I called Atalanta. "I'm riding the Piston. I'll tell you when to start losing altitude, then—"

Maeve discharged.

There was no warning. Everything went brilliant white. I shut my eyes, blinded. The Piston shuddered. I felt a heat rising through the suit, becoming unbearable. I crawled to my feet to get the heavy insulated soles between me and the copper surface. The wind snatched at me and I blinked, blinded for a moment. Disoriented, I found myself trotting across the Piston, the wind like a ram at my back. I threw myself down again, spread-eagled and clutching at the steaming metal.

I heard Atalanta cry. "Get back down, you jackass! There's nothing you can do!"

"Just hold on for a while." The fog closed in on me. I lay there, gasping with the heat.

The Piston carried me through the belly of *Maeve* until, after an eternity, I felt the slight jolt as it reached its limit almost two kilometres up. The fog swept by. We didn't have much longer; *Maeve* would be past in a minute or two.

"Atalanta! Start losing altitude now, and get as far to windward as you can." I tried to sound calm and confident, the Keeper looking after one of his charges.

"No reason why I shouldn't," she said. She sounded calm too. She'd accepted certain death.

I waited, standing again, the wind swirling around me. I moved to the centre of the Piston. I couldn't tell which was the windward side any more; the wind was blowing in circles.

Yugu's voice sounded. "How's it going, Jack?"

"She'll be in sight in a minute." And if she isn't, she'll have dropped below the cloud and started on her death plunge. "You've got that thing under control, Atalanta?" I called.

"With half a wing gone? Hardly. But I'm still here. What's your altitude?"

"Full stretch. Should be about eighteen hundred."

"Hell, I'm nearly down to that now."

"Keep your eyes peeled." I stared into the mist, and suddenly felt my feet slide from under me. I crashed onto my back and rolled over quickly. Ice crystals were beginning to form on the surface of the Piston. I could see them gathering in a deadly sheen as the metal cooled after the lightning strike. Ice – I should have thought of that before, then I'd never have come. . . . What in God's name was I doing up here, anyway? Terror makes traitors of us all. As I lay there clinging to that slippery surface on the edge of the sky, Atalanta's life didn't seem so important after all. I wished I'd stayed in the Tower and said a prayer for Atalanta's soul instead.

"I can see you, Jack!"

And there she was, a shadow in the mist, riding a fluke narrow updraft created by the wind against the Piston, wobbling but unmistakably hovering. With part of one wing missing. She was one hell of a Rider. I jumped to my feet and immediately fell again as a gust swept the surface. I slid the short knife from my belt, jabbed it into the thickening ice and began to inch my way windward.

"Okay!" I shouted. "Bring her in!"

She swooped closer, lost control and nearly flipped over, then the fuselage slammed against the edge of the Piston. The glider cracked into two halves like an egg. The tailplane and one wing fell out of sight, the cockpit and half a wing began to glide soundlessly across the Piston toward me, gathering speed.

I heard Atalanta scream.

"Jump!" I yelled.

The wing and cockpit formed an inverted Vee as they slid toward me. I saw the canopy swing back, then the hinges snapped and it whirled away in the wind. An arm thrust over the side of the fuselage. The wrecked glider slid toward me, bridging me as I lay flat with my knife dug into a wafer-thin layer of ice. I seized Atalanta's arm and almost lost my grip as she heaved herself out of the cockpit and fell beside me.

The glider hurtled on. I twisted around to watch it go; there was a horrible fascination in seeing it whisked out of sight beyond the edge of the Piston.

Atalanta said quietly, "I'm not insulated."

She meant that if *Maeve* discharged again, she would be reduced to so much carbon. I'm not one for praying, so I found myself trying to will *Maeve* to hold any remaining charge. It was probably as useful as a prayer, anyway. "Just hold onto me," I said.

As we lay shuddering, waiting for the next lightning flash, I noticed that the ice was melting and little waves were beginning to scurry across the surface. The wind increased, snatching at my suit.

Atalanta said, "We're slipping."

And we were. The knife had ceased to hold; there was nothing for it to bite into. I found myself staring at the knife point, and at the shallow scratch extending away from the point, lengthening, lengthening. My arm began to ache. I wondered if I dared raise the knife for an instant, to stab downward. After all, the knife was steel and the Piston was only copper.

"Hold on," I said.

I raised the knife, we slid, I stabbed with all the strength that remained in me.

The knife blade snapped off just below the handle and skittered away.

I suppose in those last few seconds as we slid toward the brink, I should have told Atalanta I loved her. Maybe it would have made a difference, maybe not. I had plenty of time to think about it; it was a long slow slide. Maybe some remaining snippet of common sense told me it would be a bathetic thing to do, and I didn't want to fall to my death to the sound of Atalanta's cynical laughter. Or maybe – looking back – I wasn't thinking at all. Most likely I was mindless with terror.

Locked together, we slid over the edge.



It was a short drop.

Yugu, standing foursquare on the balcony, caught us together in his powerful arms and set us on our feet. I looked up. The Piston was just sliding out of sight, at the end of its retraction. We'd fallen less than two metres.

"Nice work, boss," said Yugu.

What can you say? My legs gave way and I collapsed to the floor of the balcony, Atalanta falling with me. I was alive. I couldn't believe it. I was alive and so was she. I held her close. I couldn't feel much of her through the suit, but it was better than nothing and I needed it.

Then Yugu was helping us to our feet and through the door. He supported us with muscular arms as we stumbled down the stairs and into the Tower's relaxation suite. It's a comfortable place with all conveniences, used as overnight accommodation when the Tower is cut off from the Dome

by snow, floods or whatever. We collapsed into easy chairs, speechless with fatigue and relief.

Yugu stood in the doorway. "There'll be all kinds of calls from the Dome. People will have been listening to your transmissions. I'll field them. You two take it easy." He's a good man.

I hauled off my helmet. "Thanks for everything Yugu. I'll . . . never forget your help in this. You did everything just right."

"Argh, shut up," he answered, grinning widely. "I just worked the controls." The door closed behind his gigantic frame.

Atalanta had taken off her helmet too. Her hair was plastered against her head. She wrinkled her nose. "I need a shower, Jack. I . . . I was pretty scared out there."

I dragged myself to my feet. "So was I. Come on." I led her to the bathroom and turned on the water shower – something more healing than ultrasonics was needed today. I unzipped my suit and stepped out of it, and pulled off the rest of my clothes. Modesty was pointless after what we'd been through. Atalanta's flying suit was close-fitting and I helped her undress; her hands were shaking too much to handle the tabs. Then I took her hand and we entered the steamy world of the shower together as the tidy-mice dragged our clothing away to the laundry.

Silently I soaped Atalanta's chilled flesh, feeling it warming, marvelling at her beauty and the softness of her skin. The act was a kind of veneration – although the effect was spoiled somewhat by my instant physical arousal. Atalanta noticed this, and chuckled.

"It's been a long, hard day," she murmured. "I need to be made love to, Jack. I need comfort."

I took her to the bedroom. I couldn't believe this was happening. The Piston, the rescue, and now lying beside Atalanta in the warm bed: it was all too unreal. It didn't happen yesterday and it wouldn't happen tomorrow. It was a dream of today, vivid yet evanescent, and I had to seize what I could. Almost fearfully, I took Atalanta.

Shall I say it was the most wonderful experience of my life? No, because this is a true story and not some kind of romance. So to be honest, it was no more than not bad at all. My desire for Atalanta had always been a physical agony, and because of this I was scared I'd disappoint her with a route to personal relief that was too quick, too violent. So after the first joy of contact I concentrated on making the wonderment last, while Atalanta seemed curiously desperate, as though striving for something instead of letting it come.

Uncoordinated, we finished.

I kissed her, and felt tears on her cheek. We rested and I dozed, and awakened to find her hand on me, stroking me to arousal. We tried again. I shouldn't have to think of it as trying. And once more, it was no more than okay, but afterward she held me very close and told me she loved me.

After a while we got out of bed and fooled around in the shower, and it seemed to me that Atalanta was very happy, fooling around. We got dressed.

"I'm hungry," she announced. She exclaimed with delight when she saw the cooking facilities. "Hey, it's a real old-fashioned kitchen like in a historical drama! You really, like, heat things up yourself on these ring things?"

"That's the general idea. We're twenty kilometres from the Dome, remember. It's not worth putting this one apartment on the delivery network, particularly when it's only used occasionally."

"Can I . . . cook something?"

"Sure. I'll show you. I have all kinds of stuff in the freezer."

"Freezer?"

And we ate a meal that we enjoyed out of all proportion to its quality, and shared a bottle of wine. Afterward we sat with our arms around each other, kissing from time to time and watching the lights come on until the Dome shone like a rising sun. Yugu left us alone. He must have spent the whole evening fielding inquiries about Atalanta's rescue, and fending off the 3V people. I sympathize with the 3V reporters in their quest for news. Hardly anything ever happens on Bellatrix Six.

"This is nice," Atalanta murmured after a long silence.

I felt my heart thump. "It could go on like this."

She said nothing.

"We could live together," I said. "Either here, or in the Dome." She was living by herself now Eurydice was dead. And she'd said she loved me. And I loved her; she knew that well enough. So my suggestion made a lot of sense, didn't it?

In the end she said quietly, "I don't think so." There was something terribly final about the way she said it.

"Why not?"

She turned to look at me, and laid her hand against my cheek. "I owe you my life, Jack, and I'll never forget what you did. I could live with you in gratitude for that, but it wouldn't be fair to you."

I wondered if she was referring to our less-than-perfect lovemaking and blaming herself for it. "We must give ourselves a chance, at least. You said you love me. That counts for a hell of a lot. Surely it's worth a try, for love?"

Now she turned away and looked out of the window again. Not at the Dome; her gaze seemed to be unfocused, turned up toward the sky. It was a dark night; the stars were hidden behind heavy clouds.

"I can't explain," she said sadly. "You wouldn't understand."



Yugu filled me in a few days later: after all, he'd been Keeper's Assistant for a long time. I heard a hesitant cough beside me as I stood on the balcony watching a heavy cumulonimbus rolling in from the sea. Atalanta was out there, and a dozen others. I recognized her Shout, and felt glad for her – at the time.

"She can't live with you because she's a Storm Rider," he said. "She was quite right: it wouldn't have worked."

"How the hell do you know I asked her?"

He moved closer, as though to intimidate me into hearing him out. "Guesswork. Listen to me, Jack. You're a True Human, and you've experienced things I'm a stranger to. So tell me – what's the greatest thrill a True Human can experience?"

There was a glider skimming down the face of a distant cloud; I think it was Atalanta. I raised the zoom glasses to hide my embarrassment. I liked Yugu. I felt sorry for him; he'd never know what it was like, being with a woman. "Making love, I guess."

"And why do you think it's so much fun?"

"To encourage us to procreate, so the species won't die out, of course. Listen, I'd rather not talk about it."

"Okay, Jack. Let's talk about the storm devils instead. Remember, a few days ago I asked you if you knew what prompted the storm devils to divide? And you said they knew when they got too big."

"Yes, right. They're sentient, up to a point."

"Jack. . . ." Now he was embarrassed, hesitant. "They tell me it's one hell of a thrill, making love. But. . . believe me, it's nothing to the thrill the storm devils get when they divide. That's the reason they do it; to get the sensation, just as True Humans do."

"How can you possibly know that?"

His face was sad. "Because I felt it, once."

"You felt it? You, a Specialist?"

"I was standing on the balcony. A devil dropped out of the cloud and hovered there, watching me. It was huge, spinning and sparkling and throwing off chunks. Suddenly it happened. It whirled itself into two pieces that flew off in opposite directions, up into the cloud. And the sensation hit me

like a million volts. I thought I was going to die. Every nerve in my body seemed to go into overload; it was terrifying. But at the same time, it was. . . ." He hesitated again, searching for the right word. "I guess it was ecstasy, Jack. I don't know. I'm not a True Human."

"You felt it?"

"The thing was less than ten metres away from me. I wasn't wearing a suit. It was like an induced charge of electricity. It took me a couple of days to get over it – but then I think I'd have done anything to get that feeling again. I was hooked. . . and I understood why Keepers have got hooked in the past, and why they've ridden the Piston into the clouds without suiting up. The suit insulates them from the sensation, you see. Without it, they get the full thrill. And it's worth dying for."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"You'd have wanted to try it yourself, sooner or later. That's the way True Humans are. They're curious about such things. I've tried to make sure you were always suited up on the balcony if there was a cloud close. It's not just a normal safety precaution against lightning. It's in case a devil divides nearby. I like you, Jack. I don't want you hooked on that goddamned thrill. I want you to stay alive."

We stood quietly together for a while. The cloud came close. It was a big one, Apollo in charge. We'd decided to drain it. Apollo's glider banked and was instantly swallowed up by the heavy base of the thundercloud.

The balcony rang to Apollo's Shout, a long gurgling yell as though he was being garroted.

Suddenly I hated the Shout. It was a symbol of something so powerful that, once experienced, it ruined a person for human lovemaking. It was the reason for the Storm Rider's elitism, their code of secrecy. And it was an alien playing, if unthinkingly, with human emotions. It had made the Storm Riders prisoners – and it had cost me Atalanta.

Then an odd thought crossed my mind. As Keeper, I probably had the status to be elected to the Guild of Storm Riders myself. I could learn to handle a glider, and to ride the thunderheads. Then I'd feel that unimaginable ecstasy and I'd be Shouting with the best of them. I'm sure it would be wondrous, stupendous.

But it would be an alien ecstasy.

It wouldn't be my Atalanta.



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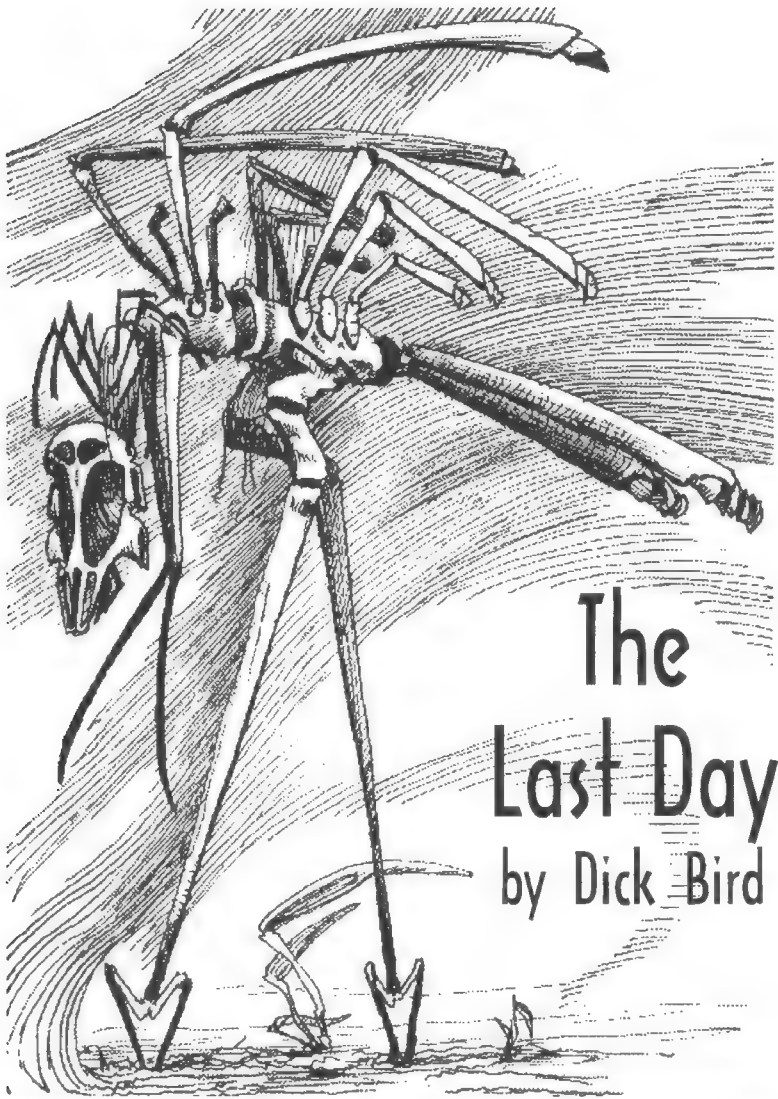


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The Last Day

by Dick Bird

Dick Bird came to Canada from England 40 years ago. Throughout stints as a pig-farmer, cabinet maker, soldier and teacher, he has *always been a writer*. His daughters never showed these tendencies, but Dick says he can't help dreaming. With dreams as disturbing and funny as "The Last Day", we're delighted that he took the time to write them down.

Wolf Read did the artwork which accompanies Dick Bird's "The Last Day." While not actually illustrations for the story, the drawings contain a suitable balance of entomology, whimsy and deadliness. The November 1996 *Analog* not only contains a fact article written by Wolf Read — he also did the cover illustration! His novella, "The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring" will be the cover story in an upcoming *Analog*, and guess who is doing the cover art. Talk about a spectacular multi-media debut.

Wanda! For the last time, you are not bringing that disgusting beast to Auntie's! It would kill her if she even knew you had one! Now hurry up, don't keep your father waiting."

"There's nothing to do at Auntie's."

"There's little what's-his-name – Panchito – to play with. Do up your shoes properly."

"That little runt just plays with himself."

"Wanda! Language! There, now he's blowing the horn. Come on, we're late."

"Why can't I go downtown with you?"

"I've told you a hundred times, you'd be bored to death. Has your tarantula got water?"

"He doesn't drink water, just blood. You're going to see that awful lawyer, aren't you?"

"Never mind that, get your hat. Be quick, he's getting angry!"

"Ow, you're hurting!"

"Will you please get in! And do up your seat belt."

"Yeah, you might need it," says her father ominously.

"Don't use that tone of voice on my daughter."

"Don't use that tone of voice on me."

"Don't talk to me like that."

"Fine, let's hear this instead." They drove to Auntie's with the radio blasting: after the local news and commentary, mostly critical, complaining, came the weather forecast, which was worse.



It's going to rain for forty days and forty nights. Everyone's going to get drowned. A golden ark will come sailing by looking for my tarantula and they'll have to take me because he won't go without me.

She stands at the back door, facing the yard. The trees at the end are a swirl and a blur.

The swing swings without anyone pushing. Rain is jumping on the puddles, making them flatten and spread. The yard will soon be a pond, then a lake, bigger than Lake Okanagan!

Auntie's complaining about the draft. If she didn't have something to whine about she'd be truly miserable. If she were to drown in this flood today, she'd hold her breath for one last complaint. She sits in the rocking chair knitting as always, glancing over her glasses at the fire.

It's a gas fire burning plaster logs. Useless, they'll never burn. It looks like a fire, but it isn't. Same fire, same logs, nothing has ever changed in

living memory. Auntie will sit in this rocking chair knitting on the last day of the world. The chihuahua, Panchito, whimpers, yaps and scrapes his claws down the screen. Raindrops shine on his skin, all goose bumps, no hair. Any moment, the wind will blow him off the porch. He'll sail away up into the clouds where his whimper will be swallowed up in the great gigantic whoopee of the sky.

His shiny, bulging eyes are fixed on hers; but hers are hard and dry as stones: sympathy?

What for? There's already a long tear in the screen above the bottom board. If he makes even a little jump, he'll land inside the house. But his jumps are futile – it isn't his fault – his legs are crooked from being coddled all his life in Auntie's lap.

Like his mistress, he complains most about the outdoors – if it isn't too hot it's too cold – if it doesn't make you cough it makes you cry – and like her, he never does anything about it but whimper to be let back into the house.

The cat called Fluffy sits at the girl's feet. After Panchito, Fluffy is Auntie's second love – she will never get to be first because she only whines to be fed, not just to be heard. Complaining is a concept beyond her. She raises a paw with its claws drawn toward the tear in the screen. She sits concentrated, still. She doesn't need to see the dog, it is enough to hear him yapping. She fixes her eyes on the edge of the board where his little pink nose appears.

Auntie grumbles, interpreting for Panchito – “surely, he must want to come in! It's freezing out there in this rain.”

“He's happy playing on the porch. I'm watching him.”

“He mustn't catch a chill. He doesn't have much hair to keep him warm. You be sure to let him in as soon as he wants, do you hear?”

The dog wails in response to the knitting needles' clack. The brass clock ticks on the mantelpiece above the hissing gas fire. All these ticking, clacking, shearing noises, like the flapping wipers on a car, clipping off the minutes of her day.

“Is my little sweet still outside? It's time to come in for his lunch. Such a nasty day, it's not like him to stay out there.”

“He says he doesn't want in yet, Auntie.”

“There's some chocolates on the table. See if that will tempt him in. My little sweetie can't resist his chocolate.”

Wanda comes back to the door with two; one in her teeth, so big she can't close her lips, one melting in her hand. The dog gazes up with bulbous wet eyes.

She knows how to tempt him all right. She bends to show him the chocolate in her mouth. Of course, he can't focus on it, so she blows the smell through the screen. His eyes bulge, he forgets to blink. His nose twitches and a strand of saliva connects him to the threshold. She waves the chocolate in front of his eyes; they can't quite keep up; his head waggles like a toy with the stuffing fallen out.

She offers the bonbon to the cat. Fluffy jerks away; if it's not meat, she's not interested. Wanda makes a sucking noise for the little dog. He gets up and wags his rump, forgiving her through the screen. He watches the chocolate rise to her lips. He watches it held, melting as the other one melted, with what is left of his dignity; he yelps his complaint into the room, "Auntie! Save me from this wicked girl!"

"Is that my little darling calling, Wanda?"

"He's just playing on the porch, Auntie."

She pokes a chocolatey finger through the tear in the screen. His little viper tongue flicks out and he bounces up and down with a cry as the cat's claws connect with his nose.

"Now that's enough. He's crying. Let him in and shut that door. It's blowing up a storm."



Now she watches him scratching a flea. He pivots and topples on his side; up again, twisting, convulsing his hips, frantic to get at the itch. It's driving him mad, he's biting his balls; then, from between his hairless legs, a little red knob pops out. He instantly forgets the flea and wraps his tongue around this new delight. Each time she sees him do this, Wanda's disgust and fascination deepen; with Panchito, with this life; limited by knitting needles, simulated gas fires, ticking clocks, flapping windshield wipers. . .

But what – what *is* this sticking out from under him? A leg? Some kind of animal's leg?

Not flesh, it's made of shell, like a crab's leg, with many joints that click as it flexes, trying to push the dog off. A sickle-shaped claw strikes the floor and the leg arches, tipping the dog off balance.

Wanda doesn't breathe. She knows she has never seen this before; yet it's familiar, something she dreamed. She leans on the door-frame, empty; she's an empty house and someone else is looking out the window. She sees a flea as big as Panchito crawl out from under him. She hears him yelp as he

scoots down the steps. And the garden is flooding, the water rising, the little runt is doomed!



But she's got a new friend; it's aware of her. It squats on the porch, flexing and arching its multiple legs. Its claws dig the wood with a crisp, tidy sound. Now here is a beast with a mind of its own; an opponent worthy of Fluffy. The cat hasn't seen it. The rules have changed, but the game goes on, hide and seek across the board. Her fur quivers, ears twitch toward it, her nostrils open to the new smell. If she stretched her neck, she'd see it over the board on the screen door, but she won't look, that's not her game.

Instead of ears and eyes and nose, the flea has antennae, cracking like whips toward the cat.

The knitting stops. "Whatever was that noise about?"

The yapping she means. Quick, girl, think. "Panchito, chasing something out in the yard."

The needles click, the rocking chair creaks, the gas fire hisses its futile hope of ever consuming its logs. The girl can't take her eyes off the flea. All the energy, all the anger she's ever known, is pent up inside that insect. It has a thorax, an abdomen, head, in a way like her own tarantula; she can't name the other parts: mouth? – does it even have separate parts? – or just one all-purpose organ, one appetite, one desire?

The cat's ears prick up in pursuit of the yapping dog through the rain. Such sharp ears; can they hear the electric hum of the creature squatting two feet away, hidden by the door. Can she smell it? Her nose wrinkles over the dog's blood on her claws.

Wanda stands over them, the cat by her left shoe, the flea beyond the screen, and she feels she is the arbiter between them.

Whenever she looks the insect twitches. With each twitch Wanda blinks and sees that it has grown. It will soon be bigger than the cat. The game! Hide and seek! Round two!

The players crouch on each side of the board. They shiver for her signal.

She hisses, and together they spring. The flea strikes its amber hook in the top of the board. The cat pounces. The flea sends up another claw that locks and turns on the cat's. The cat screams but only a buzzing comes from the insect. They swarm up and meet on the edge, the cat biting the flea's claws, the flea with all its spare legs locking round the cat's ribs and neck.

They roll down between Wanda's shoes. Black fur bulges between yellow claws. There are juicy sounds of sucking.

"That's not my little sweetie pie is it?"

"No Auntie, that was the cat."



The loose black skin is flung aside. The flea sits digesting. Again it twitches and again it grows.

Its attention switches to the gas fire; hissing vapour, dancing flames. The rocking chair, the squeaking floor. The knitting needles, the incessant click, worse than rain on the windowpane, worse than windshield wipers flapping, nagging worse than parents. At last here is someone, or some creature, to rectify these wrongs.

Auntie's eyes swim into focus; between the girl's black shoes she sees it. The needles stop.

Her hand goes up to adjust her glasses, flashing a beam of firelight. The flea bends all its legs in a crouch like a runner under the gun.

Air hisses through Wanda's teeth.

Auntie opens her lips. The girl stands and listens to her shout of "So!" – as if with the crash of the upset chair under the impact of the flea, she understands, and consents to this matter of giving her life, as she would say, so that another might live.



Wanda forgets about lunch. There are other appetites. The weather for one; the rain won't stop. The swing and the trees are a blur at the end of the flooded yard. Her parents will need an ark to get her, not a car. Soon they'll arrive to take her home. Home? Correction; the house.

Her back to the door, she sees the room. The flea seems content to watch the fire from its nest of wool and knitting needles in the rocking chair Wanda had righted. From time to time it hums a note that sends a thrill through her body. When it hums, she moves toward it. In the silence, she stands still, as still as the rocking chair.

The chihuahua must be shivering out there, drowning in the puddles of his fear. She turns to the screen door.

"Panchito, come, time for lunch!"

But all that came in was the sound of the rain.

Staring at the hissing flames, the flea twitches. Each time it twitches, it grows. It will need to be fed. If not the doggy, what else? It will have to be something alive, with red blood; maybe cat food, but not the packaged kind; she'll have to look in Auntie's fridge.

Out front a car horn toots. Father, impatient. The flea sits up, bending its antennae. She follows the beam of its humming voice across the room, along the passage to the front door, which she unlatches.

She stands aside.

She doesn't need to open her eyes. The flea behind her tucks its feet. Footsteps coming in from the rain, crushing gravel, up the steps; wait for the signal, her indrawn hiss.

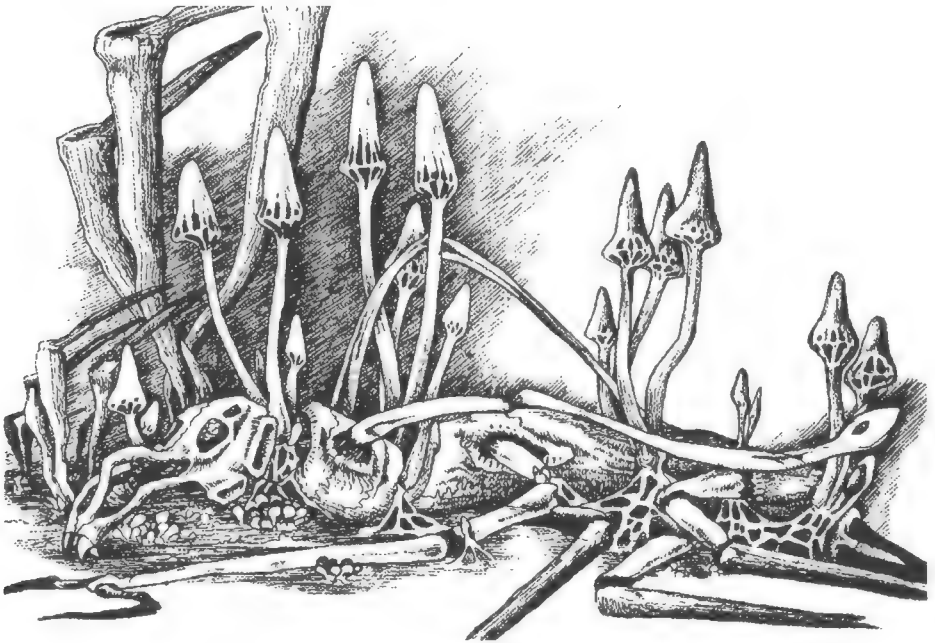
Not together; one at a time. First, the mother.

Then, when he loses patience, father.

Later, uncles, cousins, aunts. How many? She's never been sure. More will pop up at Christmas, sending cards across the country. Surely enough, an endless supply.

How long will it live? Longer than her?

An awful thought makes Wanda open her eyes; will it be jealous of her tarantula? Will she have to choose between them? ❖



SIN-EATER

by Eileen Kernaghan

When pine boards creak
and corpse-lights move along the path
from bier to burial-ground
I come to call.

I nibble at the edges of small lies,
bite into the petty acts of spite
that stick in the teeth like seeds,
choke down your guilty secrets
indigestible as unraised dough.
I savour lust as sour-sweet and pungent
as fruit left rotting in the sun,
sample the yellow acid tang of avarice
the bitter aftertaste of pride.
I swallow sloth, mucilaginous as slow-cooked gruel.
My belly churns
my ribs ache
I am bloated as a bull let loose in unripe grain,
until at last I spew your sins into the clean absolving air.

Unburdened, empty as a pricked balloon,
already ravenous for another death
I come to call.

The Hate Letter

by Barry Butson

Green humidity and orange lilies
with blooms so heavy they bow
and touch stamen to soil where
the foursome gathered on a backyard evening.
The man was dying, bones eaten out
from under him,
soon his neck would break
from mere weight of grey head.
His wife, the hostess, moved him in wheelchair
as though he were a wasp nest.
Settled in shade, he listened to the women
as his wife served tea in china cups
and tarts on a silver tray.

One of the younger women was mad
and lived in Berkeley, California;
the father of her child lived out there too,
in a commune with his other wives.
She sang an uninvited torch song
to the dying man with lines like:

“She rubbed his come all over her lips,
dabbed it gently on her nipples’ tips.”

Then she sobbed into her arms on the picnic table.
The other young woman comforted her until
she recovered enough to eat her tart,
leaving only a few crumbs on her face.

When the hostess offered more tea,
the madwoman told her:

“my mother hated you.”

(Her father was a pharmacist well-
known in the small town. What wasn't
known, except to his three daughters
and the dying man, was how the druggist

pounded his pestle into their mortars.)
The hostess went into the house
returning with a hate letter in a blue envelope.
She had kept it for decades, but
had never known who sent it.

“That’s my mother’s writing.”

* * *

“But why did she hate me?”

“For your talents. Your house was neater,
your gardens flourished, you headed up
the committees.”

Andandandandand
thinks the dying man, “you had me.
I didn’t abuse my daughters.”

The hostess handed the letter to its author’s mad daughter
who lived most of the time in Berkeley.
She dropped it with laughter into the dying man’s lap,
said, “it’s all yours, Daddy”
and called the airport from her mobile phone.

REVIEWS of ALL SORTS

I know I said last time that I'd be looking at a couple of movies based on comics, but I changed my mind. So there. I've just been reading too many good books lately, and I want to talk about a couple of them instead.

Slow River

(Del Rey, 1995), by rising star Nicola Griffith, is one of those novels that has a relatively intimate, small-scale story to tell, but tells it within a constructed world so big and so immaculately realized that it resonates far beyond its apparent range.

Told with seeming effortlessness in three braided time-lines, *Slow River* follows the life of Lore van de Oest, an heiress vaulted shockingly into a future underworld of violence, drugs and intrigue. Lore must find out what her life means, and learn whom she can and cannot trust (including herself) against the science-fictional background of an unnamed European city on the brink of a particularly believable disaster. Never in my life have I been so fascinated by sewage (Lore works in a huge bioremediation plant, a time-bomb of technology just itching to go off.) The echoes of family treachery and corporate greed ring in the new life Lore attempts to fashion, making her development

into an adult – disillusioned but ultimately fulfilled – a captivatingly thoughtful trip. It's a love story as well, of a slightly different stripe, but what kept me eagerly reading was the diamond-bright prose and the thorough scientific extrapolation.

It's a powerful second novel for Griffith (the first being the well-received *Ammonite*), deserving of its place on the Nebula preliminary ballot.

The Bones of Time

by Kathleen Anne Goonan (Tor, 1996), is also a second novel by a woman acclaimed for her first (*Queen City Jazz*), and is also a Nebula nominee. The story-line in this book ranges wider than in *Slow River*, including such big sf ideas as time travel and the cloning of historical figures, but has the intimate touch of well-rounded characters to keep it grounded.

Gen is a mathematical genius whom we meet in the year 2007 as a street-kid, and who falls in love with a girl from another time – the last days of the Hawaiian royal family. He enters into a personal quest to join her in the past, and one of the things he must do to achieve this is turn

the preserved bones of Kamehameha, the greatest of Hawaii's kings, over to the political faction which needs them.

Now the novel cuts to the year 2034. Lynn, a disillusioned geneticist with troubles of her own, rescues one of Kamehameha's clones from an assassination attempt and sets off with him on a journey of discovery through the Far East. The tale cuts back and forth, following both time lines and centring around the building of a "generation ship" plagued by political skulduggery.

Goonan's knowledge of her territory is convincing, and the elements of hard sf blend almost perfectly with the humanist tale of love and loss. I say almost perfectly because I did find the narrative structure a bit scattered and hard to decipher at times, to the point where a number of scenes lost impact for me; however, it's a minor problem that doesn't seriously mar a terrific read.

Both these novels are highly recommended. There's serious, well-developed science fiction coming from such exciting talents as Goonan and Griffith; they along with other female newcomers (Valerie Freireich springs to mind) are succeeding in the task of blending hard science with humanist story. I hope we'll be seeing lots more from them all.

– Book Reviews by Sally McBride

CRASH

To get my biases out in the open right up front. I'll admit that *Videodrome* and *The Naked Lunch* are two of my favourite films of all time. Earlier in David Cronenberg's career, there was *The Fly*. *Dead Ringers*. *Scanners*, as well as *Rabid* starring Marilyn Chambers - who had already become an icon of our times by turning from Ivory Snow girl to porn star.

Unease is Cronenberg's stock in trade. It was only natural for him to cut his teeth on horror films. After the huge popular success with *The Fly*, Cronenberg obviously had some major choices to make about the trajectory his career would take. Though I would have dearly loved to have seen a Cronenberg version of *Total Recall*, I am glad he stayed true to his own vision.

Like every other film he has ever made, *Crash* was intended to disturb. It seems to have done its job very well. For those who don't know its history, *Crash* won the first ever special jury prize for "audacity" in Cannes, where some audience members walked out and others booed. It set box office records in France. It has ignited a scandal in Britain, where politicians have been calling for it to be banned and critics have been denouncing it as the crudest, most deviant bit of pornography

Continued on page 76

THE ROAD

by
**Cathleen
Thom**



We are proud to present Cathleen Thom's first story sale, written last year when she was 15. Cathleen attends high school here in Victoria, and also is a talented artist working in clay. Her surreal, sculptural works were shown at a downtown gallery not long ago. Watch for Cathleen's name to appear in future artistic spheres--she's off and running already.

Lorri McMullen is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art who lives in Victoria with her husband and their baby boy. Lorri recently donated a huge painting to the Canadian Cancer Society. She was thrilled when it sold to a large corporate sponsor for \$30,000. Anyone wanting to buy any of Lorri's other work for a similar price is urged to contact the artist directly.

I'm not sure the implications of all this," my brother Keegan said hesitantly, pushing up his glasses, a nervous movement I think he got from me. "But grandfather has become a road."

The announcement was met with some surprise, granted, but some of the elders had, I think, expected such a thing. From their faces, one would never know. You had to look for things with our elders, twitches of the brow, or whether grandmother Sarah pushed her hair back. It had become such a habit for her, she tended to reach up and twitch it into place whether it needed such ministrations or not. When she stopped, it was an important moment.

"Well, he always wanted to travel." Uncle Harry laughed uproariously, having, as usual, too much to drink. His wife kicked him discreetly under the table. I would not have noticed if he hadn't suddenly rounded on her and demanded petulantly: "Whaddya do that for?" Uncle Harry was always rather dense.

"Keegan," my mother said. "What have you been told about being late for dinner?"

"But Mother," Keegan implored, uncertain now. He'd clutched the grim news so tightly for so many minutes it seemed unthinkable that it could be any less than the centre of attention. But what did mother care if her crazy old father-in-law turned into a road? Her son was late for dinner, and that was the unthinkable.

"But. . .but, he's a road." Keegan stuttered vainly. Poor Keegan, the baby of the family, to whom no one ever really listened. "Come and see!"

"Keegan —" But mother was drowned by the sudden creaking and popping of joints as all the elders struggled to rise, expectant grins cracking their faces like new stone.

She sighed and turned to her husband, who ignored her, and then, fruitlessly, to Uncle Harry's poor wife. The table was empty except for mother, Uncle Harry's wife and toothless Great Uncle Gerald, who was sleeping obliviously in a plate of mashed potatoes.

The rest of us were standing in the front yard, staring at grandfather and cocking our heads, another family idiosyncrasy which began with my great great Uncle Cyril, a storyteller and master of the eloquent gesture. Well, that's what father always told me. Uncle Harry says it's a hereditary shortening of the left vocal cord.

The road began in the shadow of grandfather's old wicker chair on the porch. From there it spilled down the stairs and led south-east, away from the setting sun, stretching beyond the horizon.

“Huh,” Great Aunt Hatty grunted, amused. “Certainly looks like old Darren.” It did, in fact. I couldn’t really tell you what it was about the strange old road, but it had that same dreamy, saggy-cheeked quality that one always thought of when speaking of grandfather.

Keegan was the first to step on the road, Keegan being the only person in all our mob who ever conversed with grandfather through these final years. The rest of them, snatching up false teeth and tripping over beards, hurried after him. From then on I think it was pure instinct that spurred us on, as well as grandfather’s tendency to nag.

Some of the younger ones would run on ahead, but the road would disappear from them if they strayed too far. For the most part we moved in a clump, and elicited much interest from those we passed, though none felt moved to join us. It had become a sort of obsession with us, to walk grandfather to his wrinkled end, if there was one. We rarely spoke, preferring to stumble silently through the world.

We saw some truly amazing things: flying men and snakes that danced, and a fast food restaurant that really served food. I suppose my mother and Uncle Harry’s poor wife remained at the dinner table with toothless Uncle Gerald, waiting for us to return and muttering in distressed tones about the condition of the soup. Or perhaps they left, spitting in our direction and running off to join the circus, and have been trodden upon by elephants by now.

We walked right over the sea, and if one of us strayed too near the edge for comfort, grandfather would stretch out to catch them. We continued on the road, and ceased to argue the possibility of it all, for it only made us dizzy.

There is something about walking forever. You never slow down, nor speed up, for you never know when the end might come upon you. Everything is immediate, for there is nothing to expect save more road, stranger sights. When you become thirsty, you drink. When you become tired, you sleep. There is no future, nor is there a past.

We had become like the road ourselves, going on forever and ever toward the rising sun, never straying from the course we had chosen. Over ocean and mountain, grandfather protected us from the world. After a time we had no need of sustenance or slumber. We dreamed as we walked, and there was no need for talk, or breath at all. I think it was the first time in his life Uncle Harry had ever been silent.

In all my watching, in all my wanderings with mind or body, I think I have grown. Or, to be more specific, my eyes have grown. They have ex-

panded above my head, so that I see even myself as a minute figure below, plodding endlessly. My vision expands even further with time, I see everything at once, know everything to be known. I have read over the shoulders of the great thinkers, but the further I go the more I retreat to the road for protection from what I have seen. Am I, then, a god, or am I simply a cartoonish-looking madman with exceptionally callused feet?

Before the end I will discover that there is no god, there are no demons. Humanity is no longer capable of cruelty or kindness; all we can do is watch, and walk that endless road.

The wind had just left us when we reached the unthinkable, many turns later, where grandfather ended. Some of us paused in terror, for we had walked so long we could live nowhere else. We no longer knew how to breathe. The younger of us paused, paralyzed. The elders, with their usual inscrutable looks, strode determinedly forward and we watched them unfold with smiles on their dull, rocky faces.

Twenty-six new roads unfolded, and I joined them. The inexplicable freedom of stretching out forever without taking another step! Others followed me, joining in the elation of finally unfolding from their shells.

In the end, only Keegan chose to remain. I can feel his bare feet on my back still, though I am beginning to forget. Someday I will be nothing but a barren old road, but for now my brother keeps me alive, and I keep him enclosed safely forever inside his own lonely path. He is beyond loneliness now. I roll on before him for now, but when I end, it will be his turn to fall down and unfold himself.

It seems odd that the final expression of the human soul is trodden upon daily, when not being hacked to pieces by the Public Maintenance Department. But I have no more time to wonder. For now I stretch on beyond the horizon, and watch. There is only Now. ❖

CONQUEST

by Catherine Mintz

I remember him,
His teeth white as fresh-peeled thorns
In his rose-red mouth.

Cenotaphs

by Carolyn Clink

It's a mistake that anything rises up
from the scorched and barren land that had been Canada.
Somehow, quite unintentionally, we'd left
a string of grave markers – tombstones for the true north.

In Vancouver, former Lotus Land, there's still a
lookout at the Harbour Centre Tower. No one's
left to use the observation deck; then again,
there's nothing to observe. It is still raining.

The curving roof of the Saddledome leans against
the Calgary Tower. The Olympic flame died
when the oxygen was sucked out of the city
The view of the Rockies is, of course, glorious.

Toronto's CN Tower is the tallest of
all. Its sundial shadow tracks across a wind-swept
landscape of fused steel, shattered glass, and the once-great
lake. There is no place to stand, and nothing grows.

In Montreal, Maisonneuve's Cross on Mont Royal
defends a patch of land from the poisoned St. Lawrence,
whose acid waters have almost filled the crater.
Floods submerge the remains of Man and His World.

Our home and native land ends at Cape Spear, Newfoundland.
Anchored in rock so old it predates the fossil
record, the lighthouse's blind eye searches in vain
across the once-again sterile grey ocean.

BC, the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec,
the Maritimes: caught in the crossfire of former
superpowers, the cultural mosaic became
a melting pot. CP rails ran like quicksilver.

Rose Today

by Timons Esaias

Each day she rises imagining
How bad it might have been, and isn't.
Thanks her stars
The Big One didn't tear the ground
to pieces, killing millions;
That in her lifetime no crust-crunching meteor
no sky-devouring comet struck the Earth;
That, so far, no Black Death devoured most of
her species, or any species
(Well, except the elms) dear to her.

She's had bad days, but her imagination
summons fearful comparisons:
Volcanoes spewing endless ash,
Governments to make the Nazis blush,
Wars of utter dissolution,
World-engirdling storms that
tear and howl and
Only grow stronger.

Her mother died; and her father dies horribly; but these
she told herself,
Were only anecdotal – she mourned,
but kept it in perspective.
That winter the Storm of the Century put two feet of snow
in her driveway
flattening the forsythia;
but melted in a matter of days.

She lives a happy life, why not?
Despite war, starvation, persistent minor plagues,
Her sun, unexploded, and still undimmed
Rose today.

SNIFE

TOM
PICCIRILLI

Illustration © 1996 by GAK

Tom Piccirilli is the author of *Dark Father*, *Shards*, *Hexes* and *The Dead Past*. He's also a book reviewer and co-editor of *Pirate Writings* and *Space & Time* magazines. *Pentacle*, his recent collection of five intertwined stories from Pirate Writings Publishing, won the *Deathrealm* award for Best Collection. Tom is currently at work on a dark mystery novel, as well as a novel that continues his popular "Self" series.

I swear if I ever get out of this cage of flesh and scales, I'll snap Cassidy's neck.

The stasis room is meant for safely containing radioactive soil samples brought back to the ship by the outrider cybernauts: they dispatch the specimens through the science wing's intestinal hull, and the automatoid arms separate, tag and process the samples for Murch and Briggs to study later.

But Cassidy's found a new use for the skeletal plasti-steel claw. He's much more computer literate than I ever gave him credit for – during the night he bypassed several of the lower security triggers and overrode the internal wiring functions, forcing current up the length of the rods.



He can effectively torture me with the electrified retractile claw, and for a man who's supposed to be the team's Primary Contact Relations Officer, he's got an innate talent for guessing weak spots: near the looser scales on my belly, the soft spot of membrane beneath the quills at the back of my elongated skull, and the quivering tip of my snout.

Cassidy's trying to teach me new tricks. "Hey now," he says, "what in the hell did Mother Nature ever see in a scurrying turd like you?" He's got a sick laugh to go with his sadistic streak and handsome beach-bum features – low and ugly, like the braying of a mule. I don't know how the others can be so deaf to it. He works while they sleep.

Cassidy must've been the type of child who quickly graduated from tearing the legs off spiders to haunting the neighbourhood searching for puppies left out in the yard. When we were at Colony Theta I'd heard rumours that he'd been degraded a stripe for raping the daughter of a Crysalian bishop. Even if Cassidy's father was an eight-pointed General and Chief of the Program, how the son of a bitch made it onto a scout team mission was beyond me.

But then again, everything at this point is beyond me.

I'm able to do extremely little here: mostly, I roll and hop and sometimes stagger as if drunk. I've discovered that my legs are nearly useless, and I must propel myself by curling my tail under me and snapping forward; I feel like I'm playing shuffleboard with myself. I don't have the knack. It's difficult to get all the movements in synch-bend twelve legs, snout to the floor, tuck the tail, then whip hard – and time it perfectly before Cassidy brings the claw out to tear into me again. Too slow.

There are no mirrored surfaces in the stasis room, and since I can apparently live without liquid, I don't even have the option of seeing myself in a water dish. In front of the tail I have a tentacle, I think, something akin to an elephant's trunk that juts behind me. I've tried to use it to help move

but I keep throwing myself off. It tends to make me wheel end over end, like a rotary cycle coming in too hard on a Z-deck street. Whatever the tentacle is, I hope it's not a sexual organ. If I'm ever aroused I might kill myself with it.



They had to convert this section of the room for me; obviously they don't feel safe keeping me – this life form – in the usual zoological holds. I don't know why. Perhaps I'm stronger than I think, or have fangs or some other method of defense I haven't figured out how to use yet. I can see Briggs on the other side of the screen reading off the diagnostics of this body. He hasn't slept well since I found the alien – since it found me – and he tends to nod off in his seat. He's grown a beard, and black bags underline his eyes. He's constantly taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose muttering to himself. I can tell he hasn't been eating well enough; he's lost his slight paunch and looks almost frail, his face drawn. The readings he gets intrigue him to no end, and he spends hours simply watching me. Yet for all of that he can't figure out that Cassidy has rewired the automatoid arms.

I've tried spelling words out on the floor, but whenever I come close to finishing my name, the tentacle flips me over and I roll, stagger and spin out of control. Briggs makes notes. He sends all sorts of minerals, vegetables, meats and other materials in through the intestinal hull, hoping I'll eat or react to them, build a nest or reproduce, I suppose.

Thanks to Cassidy's urging, they've christened me the Snipe.

Idiots.

Twelve Ph.D.s among Murch and Briggs alone and that's the best they could come up with? An old joke by way of Arkansas? I can imagine Cassidy's father playing the ancient game with him when he was an adolescent, leading the boy into the deep woods to hunt the nonexistent snipe, giving him orders not to come home until he'd caught the biggest damn snipe this side of Nogodoches. The General would have left his son in the black thickets to go drinking with the other jarheads, laughing and wondering how long the wool would be pulled down over the kid's eyes, sitting in the brush, shivering in the shadows.

Certainly long enough to make him hate the Snipe.



I don't eat, drink, sleep, screw or excrete.

I've lost most of my major vices.



I'm building a tolerance to Cassidy's tortures; the voltage only numbs this body now, and even makes me feel a little high. My snout has toughened.

Where I once was susceptible to the plasti-steel claw tearing into my flesh, a cuticle-like sheathe now completely covers my underside.

It's as hard as stone and gives me a new gait, clacking across the floor so that I now sound as if I'm tap dancing.

I'm also learning how to hone my hate.



It comes to see me this morning, wearing my body.

The alien speaks with Briggs and Murch at length, stroking my chin the way I used to back when the chin was mine. I stare up through the stasis energy field at a body I only appreciated during Program testing and in bed with women; I wasn't satisfied until I forced myself to stay out in two-G stress envelope for more than an hour, until I'd undergone immunity system enhancement for three weeks instead of the usual five, and set a Program record for isolation reservoir endurance.

It wears my insignia and uniform, my dog tags, hair style and scars. My wry smile.

It sleeps in a cabin that has four bare walls. On a small desk with empty drawers sits a photograph of my wife, Megan, in a black diamond frame I had made on Crysalian. She's grinning one of her patented lopsided grins, long blonde hair swept in a fan over her left eye, wet from rainfall; and her husband is holding her around the waist in a soft lock-grip he'd once used to kill a Mollunk on Theta, and he's smiling into the camera with his cheek touching hers. He doesn't have a tentacle. On Earth, when aroused, he often begins with whispering and tracing the smile lines around her mouth, the tiny gutter of a scar near the corner of her nose. She whispers back, funny and loving, and then they stop speaking and shift closer, neither leading, both giving.

"You don't look any worse for wear after three weeks of quarantine," Murch says to it.

"I spent three months in an isolation tank back in the Program," it tells him. "A little down time in an air-lock chamber was a walk in Byrth'maur garden." I agree that's the truth, if it had been me. My training has helped me to skirt the frustration that rises to border insanity.

"I could deal with a stroll on Byrth'maur right now," Briggs says.

"You're running yourself into the mud on this," it continues in my voice "Go easy. Murch will pick up the slack."

"Of course," Murch says. "Please. I enjoy picking up slack. I have so little to do."

His sarcasm is not wasted on the alien, who smiles my smile. "I want both of you to start getting at least six hours of sleep again."

Briggs barks a laugh and shakes his head, his lap covered with books and read-outs. "Are you kidding? Look at all this. I've got to make some kind of sense out of my research before I relay the rest of it over to the Wayfaring II satellite."

"Why bother? Let them do some work for a change."

Murch fingers his thinning hair, and his large hand sweeps down his neck, trying not to scratch. He's got that same slight facial rash he always gets from stress. "We've got an alien specimen here that goes against every law of nature we know, treading on every word put down by Darwin, Skinner, Desseneur and Thompson. You thought the White Star Curve at the edge of the Milky Way put a kink in Einstein's laws? This is much worse."

"Or much better."

Briggs nods in agreement. "Or that, depending on how you look at it, what you can see in all this. The telemetry we're receiving from the cybnauts is going to throw the scientific community on its collective ear. If they believe us at all, which they probably won't, unless they see the damn thing for themselves."

My body shrugs. "Because of one life form?"

Briggs swallows thickly. "Because it doesn't eat or excrete, yet continues to exist, and we have no idea how. It takes in no energy that we understand and leaves no spoor. It is not affected by radiation or lack thereof, and neither is there any significant change in its well-being induced by G-stress or any other factors in the tests we've made. The only physical permutation it's undergone since you caught the creature is that it's grown a small patch of an unknown dermis on its lower quarter. Since its 'normal skin' is also unknown, we can't be certain what the effect and cause is, or if, for that thing, this is completely typical characteristic. Maybe it's an effect of your gun blast. We've sent through thousands of material samples, and it ignores them all. It has no neural, digestive, circulatory, hypothalamic or reproductive systems, and no brain activity we can spot. That is what we have here in this one life form."

"One is all we need to learn its so-called primary functions," Murch adds. "But there's so much more we're missing out on. If we came across just one more of these snipes we could learn how they interact, and mate, and if they adhere to any particular societal codex. The outriders have inspected four hundred square kilometres of land in a standard search and seismographic pattern and they've turned up nothing but extremely simplistic plant life. This snipe may very well be the only one of its kind."

"The last one?" my voice asks. "Or the only one ever?"

"Impossible to tell."

"What does the Wayfarer I say?"

"It loops 'insufficient data'."

"Terrific."

"And our best guess isn't worth taking," Briggs says. "We haven't found any evidence to support either hypothesis. Nothing. Just the snipe and about ten thousand square kilometres of desert and radioactive rock." He stops to light his pipe. "But at least we did find this one."

"And we owe it to you," Murch says, clapping it on my shoulder. "Maybe we should name it after you."

He, me, the alien, grins, my lips shining. "Snipe seems to be more than adequate."

Don't bet on that, I think.

They'll name your species after me yet; when I get back there I'll make sure I rig the outriders to find you and your kind in every cranny of this wasteland, and I'll use a 100-round Q-404 blaster to personally scatter you across your dead, burning valley. The scales, tentacle, everything. So that Darwin, Skinner, Desseuner, Thompson and I can all rest easy.

How could it have stolen so many of my memories? . . . how can it act so much like me? . . . with the same gestures and manner and speech. I can't expect the crew to notice the differences because there aren't any.

What is it planning? . . .

The three of them stand and watch me through the stasis field; I stare back. I attempt to hold its eyes, looking for some hint of triumph or cold satisfaction, a subtle sneer, but it has no more interest in me than Murch or Briggs, and possibly far less.

"Maybe we should let it go?" it asks.

Murch's eyebrows arch across his forehead. "To study it in its natural habitat?"

My body shrugs. I never realized I was so big on shrugging. "If it is the only one, then we might have stepped into the middle of. . ."

". . . a kind of divine intervention on nature's part?" Murch finishes, scratching his neck.

What used to be my icy grey eyes grow even calmer, glancing at me now hopping across the floor, sliding onto my back, the tentacle whipping wildly on its own accord. Those hard grey eyes rarely allow any emotion to escape, so I've been told. But what emotions does it have beneath my flesh, in my brain, when I'm not even there? Stroking my cleanly shaved chin, it shrugs.

Murch sighs heavily. "I've given a lot of thought to that possibility."



Briggs seems to have ignored the entire conversation. "How's the arm?"

“Fine,” it replies, rolling up the sleeve and showing my arm off. My right arm, the one I’ll use to snap Cassidy’s neck when I finally retrieve myself, the one I’ll hold the Q-404 with. “Doesn’t hurt at all, and the scar has almost completely faded.”

“No lasting side effects after quarantine?”

“None.”

“Megan will be glad to hear that. She sent her transmissions every Friday night as always though she knew you wouldn’t be out for three weeks.”

“I’ve scanned the tapes,” it says. “That’s my lady. The relay window to Earth opens in another hour and. . .”

Luck as much as rage makes everything come together; tail curled under me, tentacle ready to flip forward, legs hunched finally in synch with one another, I lunge and hit the field. Blue sparks flash and skitter in the heat of photon emission. My scales and quills burn, and I can feel my upper legs frying, but I keep at it, slowly climbing the field of crackling energy. Another physical law dispelled – walking in stasis – but I don’t think about it. There’s a pain more intense than agony, yet so different from anything I’ve felt before that I’m not even quite sure it’s pain anymore; I scream, somehow, without a throat, and the screech backs Murch up a few steps as he covers his ears. The scale on my belly takes the brunt of the juice and begins to smoke.

“It’s actually moving in the field,” Briggs says spellbound. “Impossible.”

Murch grabs a sheaf of notes as if to protect himself. “It’s committing suicide!”

“No,” the alien says, grimacing, my voice quiet and deep. “It’s. . . trying to get after me, I believe.”

“Shut down the field before we have an overload!”

Briggs stands paralysed, unsure of the next move to make: watch the snipe destroy itself or let it out of the stasis room and let it run amuck aboard ship? He worries his bottom lip as the black smoke spirals along my tail and spumes out among the blue motes of light.

Cassidy runs in amid the confusion. “Hey now, what in the hell?” The tentacle stabs forward, edging through the field; nothing is capable of doing that. What is this snipe? What have I become? The pain has turned back into pain, and my screeches grow louder, and I move up another few centimetres, but I’m on fire thinking of Megan talking with that thing.

Cassidy yells, “Get a blaster and kill it!”

“No,” my voice answers. The alien is watching me curiously as if wondering if I would keep going even if it meant my death, simply to get at it. Perhaps the idea of seeing its own burning corpse is too much. “Shut down the field.”

Murch's splotchy face is as open as the books and read-outs he holds to his chest. He's certain that this course of action is bucking the rules, but he's a scientist and willing to relent in the name of science. He stares at my flaming legs. He turns to the control panel and starts punching in the shut-down code.

Cassidy wheels and punches Murch in the stomach, then stiff-arms him straight to the chest and shoves him into Briggs, knocking them both over the panel. "Are you crazy? You can't let that monster out!"

Too much, I can't hold onto the energy field any longer and fall back, my tentacle and tail both kicking out in opposite directions so that I drop like a streamer and land on my head. The moment lengthens as if time is trapped in stasis with me. None of us move for a minute, until I crawl to the centre of the room, tentacle kicking me over and over.

Briggs wipes blood from his mouth. "Cassidy, you son of —"

"Shut up. You all ought to be thanking me for saving your lives." Cassidy's lips curl into a jeering smirk of disgust and amusement. The alien turns on him, grey eyes like rivets, and bends to help Briggs up. Cassidy brays. "Hey now, that sucker's really got a thing for you," he says. "Guess it doesn't like the way you cheat at wrestling."

My body faces him, fists that are easily capable of shattering his ribcage down at my sides. "It didn't leave me much choice, the way it leaped out from the rocks. If I hadn't got my gun under the thing it might have torn me to pieces."

"Figured you'd see it my way."

"I don't. I don't want it harmed unless it's absolutely necessary."

Torn?

Do I have teeth?

God, I hope so.

If I can't ever get back into my own body, I'll kill it.



I remember walking up the cliff and catching only a glimpse of the creature among the rocks. I'd decided to go out with one of the cybernaut outriders, sitting in my rad suit in the heart of three tonnes of a cybernetic tank ensemble. Nothing short of a direct hit from a hyper-concussion shell could put a dent in the alloy.

On the flashscreen I watched a dead valley unfolding. The subtle signs of plant life amazed Murch and Briggs enough to make hourly reports to the Wayfarer II, but even my patience would only hold out so long as I had a rescue mission, a war, an alien archaeological dig, anything to look forward

to. This planet held my interest about as much as a sandbox. I had to get out of the ship in the hopes that there'd be something to find.

Riding the cybernaut through the wasteland was like losing myself in an isolation reservoir filled with silica. The cybernetic unit tramped up the valley wall until I spotted the caves among the cliffs. I thought I'd do some exploring, see if I could find anything more than a few four-leaf clovers. The second I opened the hatch the snipe was on me.

Inside me.

Me.



"Hey now," Cassidy says this morning. "Why is it you leaped for your buddy last night but you won't even make a move for yours truly." He goes to work on the automatoid claw, twisting a rainbow of wires to tap even more juice. "Let's see if we can fix that some."

He ups the voltage and fixes it with agony.

Helping to make me stronger.

I have to get through the field.



It comes to the stasis cage and peers at me; if I ever get my eyes back I swear I'll show my wife at least a part of my heart; I can't stand to see them. They're colder than I could ever have imagined. What does it think of when it looks at the photograph of my smiling Megan? What does it dream about? When will it make its move against my crew? What messages does it send through space back to my lady when the transmission window opens, and is it possible that she also can't see through the deception? Can the alien have stolen so much of my personality and left me with so little of its own?

It strokes my chin and bends to one knee, watching me, down on the same level.

"I didn't exactly want to bring you here, snipe. You jumped me, remember?"

The charade goes on. Fury, like pain, is something else inside the snipe. I leap into stasis. The field sputters and the flames begin to dance up my snout. Where are the teeth? The tentacles lashes out and snaps back too quickly, not as lucky as the other day, nothing working in synch. Legs aren't holding well enough, the energy spits, and sparks ignite my tail. No chance to even begin getting through. I plop back to the floor, scuttle, flip and turn back to it.

"What are you?" my voice whispers. "Why do you hate me so much?"

A single emotion bleeds through the grey stone of his eyes, and the sincerity rings in his voice like echoes off the cliff face.

Pity.
Oh my God.
It can't be true.
It really is me.



A lone and solitary snipe living on a dead world, alive for no reason except to be; so much in and of itself, like a single empty vessel, that it . . . what? . . . is completely empty? . . . only as alive as a mirror? Could, my Christ, could this body have somehow copied that which was me, my mind and soul, the man I am, standing before the snipe I am. . . and now I was, I am, both creatures?



Cuticle has thickened and lengthened around my underside, hardening and reinforcing the scales. The electrified arm catches me in the claw and squeezes, tighter and tighter. Appendages reaching for Cassidy, he punches up the voltage until the air is sizzling. I pull and force the claw, bit by bit, back into the field, current running into the stasis energy, red, yellow and black sparks exploding into flames. My tentacle and tail work in conjunction for once, and like a knife I thrust up and into the burning waves.

Cassidy laughs even though the flickering field scares him. "Hey now, what in the hell, little buddy?" Finally pissed off, eh?" He leaves the panel and rushes forward. Briggs and Murch come in together, with me behind them. The field erupts and I'm leaning through – I'm through! – snout springing up but falling short. Briggs is closer, but I can't do it to him.

I fall to the floor on the other side and scuttle past Murch's feet. He's not afraid to grab the snipe, and I have to dodge his hands before he's inadvertently imprisoned in snipe hell. Cassidy knows I'm coming for him now and squeals like any terrified animal, but he's laughing too, enjoying the ruckus, finally having caught his snipe, maybe making his father proud, running for the far wall and reaching for his weapon. He turns to fire and my hand chops down on his wrist. Jesus, let me touch Cassidy, once, that's all it would take to free my soul, I pray, and trap him, damn it, I hope, please oh God, please let me out of here, just let me out, please let –



Hey now, what in the hell?



It Ain't All Broomsticks & Roses



Illustration © 1996 Lorri McMullen

by
Sue
Storm

With Sue Storm's reputation as one of the bright, new lights in the horror genre, we were delighted to receive a story from her. To say that we were surprised by the nature of that story would be an understatement. "It Ain't All Broomsticks and Roses" is as whimsical and fun as most of her other work is scary and disturbing. For a taste of the darker stuff, order her chapbook, *Star Bones Weep the Blood of Angels* for \$5 from Jasmine Sailing/Cyber-Psycho's A.O.D., Box 581, Denver, CO 80201.

The clock winked at me.

All day long I'd felt it staring, making the skin crawl on the back of my neck. It was one of those big white clocks that count off the seconds in constipated little clicks. Plain and ugly, like the kind they always had in school.

And now it was winking at me.

"Polly? You got the layouts done yet?" Karen poked her head into my office. I looked up at her, then back at my computer. The screen filled up with tiny pink hearts. I shook my head.

"Sam wants to see them before four. Oh yeah, and here's that card we're signing for Debra. Listen—" She stepped inside. Karen was tall and bony. If she were a man, she'd be called lanky. Unfortunately, the kindest term given to tall, ungraceful women like Karen was "gawky". She'd learned to make up for it, though, with her tongue. Karen cut down more people before breakfast than most folks did in a week. "—did you know she was pregnant? Poor kid, I wondered why this wedding thing came up so quick. Isn't it funny how here it is the 90s and some people are still living in the Dark Ages? I mean —"

While she talked, the electric pencil sharpener I'd shoved under my desk started murmuring, "Pretty legs, oh so nice, pretty, pretty, smooth lovely legs . . ." I kicked it. The thing yipped once and then fell quiet.

"Are you all right, Polly?"

My face expressed, I hoped, a passable grin.

"OK, then. Hey, I better let you get back to work. You know how Sam is if stuff's late."

When she'd gone, the photocopier in the corner started quoting love poems.

"Shut up," I whispered.

It didn't, though. And now the clock was leering. I wanted to leave, but those layouts must be finished. Hunched over my keyboard, I worked doggedly, constantly saving, since the screen kept replacing my work with page after page of torrid love letters.

I'd gone to the Circle about it. Not at first, mind you. I'd wanted to, but acute embarrassment kept my mouth shut for several weeks. But finally, after that absolutely mortifying incident on the subway, desperation drove me to ask for their help. It happened on the way home from work. The train stopped dead in its tracks (so to speak) and burst out in a medley of Spanish love songs. Luckily, no one else knew exactly where the noise — and believe me, a singing train can only be expressed as noise — originated.

That night, the Coven conferred without me. I waited in my own apartment, where I'd put all the machines in the bedroom closet. My nerves

drew out tighter and tighter, like guitar strings wound so tautly the slightest touch snaps them. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Beth, who runs a woman's bookstore and herbal supply on the ground floor of my apartment building, finally knocked on the door.

"It's a leak," she said, pulling off blue-sequined gloves and shaking rain from her hair. Beth didn't believe in umbrellas, said they cramped her aura.

"A leak?" I frowned, not understanding. "What do you mean?"

"You know, a power leak."

"I'm leaking power?"

"It happens sometimes."

"Into machines?"

"That's the odd part. Fran said she'd never heard of it before." Fran was our Coven historian. "But we burned the broken shells of a newly hatched bird – not too easy this time of year –"

I nodded. Spells worked with eggshells often had to wait until spring.

"– but luckily Janet had some left over– and rubbed the ashes into Penny's scrying mirror. It showed a picture of you with little red and purple wisps going off in all directions. Power leak, that's all it can be."

Beth looked at me, and her face showed reluctant awe, though she tried to control it.

"You're lucky, you know," she said. "Only the strongest have so much power it actually leaks out."

"But I don't want to be lucky!" I wailed. "It's ruining my life."

She shrugged. "Wish I had that kind of ruination."

"Hubba, hubba!" yelled the kitchen stove.

I groaned. "No you don't, Beth, trust me." Nervous sweat pooled under my arms, soaking my blouse, but I had to ask. "What about, you know, the way they act so – so – uh, indecent?"

Beth shook her head. "Not a clue. Nothing in the books about it. Seems to be a brand new manifestation." She looked at me thoughtfully. "You horny or something?"

"Beth!" I blushed furiously.

"Oh, don't be such a prude. I'm just asking."

"Isn't there anything the Circle can do about it? The power leak, I mean. It's really embarrassing."

"Shannon just got a new spell book from her mother for her birthday, and she's pretty anxious to try some out. Tomorrow, when we all get together for the New Moon dessert potluck, we can give it a whirl, see what we come up with."

She stood, pulling on her sparkling gloves. "Until tomorrow, then."

The telephone whispered as Beth opened the door, "How do I love thee, let me count the ways . . ."

"I can't wait." My reply was fervent, and Beth, smirking a little, blew me a kiss before leaving.

"You'll be fine, dear."

Fine wasn't exactly how I'd describe my night. For hours, I listened to the muffled sounds of the ancient TV dueling with my new stereo from behind the closet door where I'd stuffed them. The TV crooned old Frank Sinatra love songs, while the stereo screeched the latest Arrowsmith and UB40 odes to undying love. I didn't sleep a wink.

The next evening, I arrived at the dessert potluck shamefaced and toting a greasy bag of bakery cookies. My stove had driven me out with its lewd innuendoes as I tried cooking a carrot cake. I should've known better when I turned it on to preheat, and it hissed "Hot to trot, baby, hot to trot."

"Polly, my dear, how are you?" Shannon gathered me into her ample arms and gave me a crushing hug. "I'm so proud of you – imagine, a power leak! And right in our very own Circle. We're all soooo jealous, sweetie."

When she released me, I mumbled something about how I didn't think anyone had reason to be jealous. But the others – Beth, Fran and Cynthia – watched me with the distant eyes of friends who've just seen one of their own win the lottery.

"Listen," I pleaded. "It's not what you think. I mean, there're these machines leering at me all the time and saying the most awful things . . ."

I trailed off. They glared stonily, and I could tell they thought I was being positively ungrateful about having too much power.

"My gal, my gal, talking about my gal!" shouted Shannon's computer in the corner.

Heads turned to stare at the machine. "My GAL!!!"

"You could unplug it," suggested Cynthia, as she daintily licked chocolate from her fingers.

"It is unplugged," said Shannon.

My shoulders slumped. "Doesn't seem to matter."

"Well, then." Shannon rose. The many silver bracelets on her arms twinkled and clinked as she waved her hands. "Let's get on with it. I'm bringing the meeting to order. Shall we read the minutes from the last Conclave?"

Fran stood and read, her no-nonsense voice beginning to falter as, one by one, the other machines in the room boisterously vowed their eternal love.

"That's enough, enough!" Shannon finally banged her crystal wand on the coffee table, as if ordering the machines to shut up. They didn't listen.

"If we're all agreed," she raised her voice above the din. "*I think we should move right on to new business.*" The others nodded, setting down their dessert plates and brushing crumbs from their laps. Shannon paged through her new blue-and-pink velvet spell book. "I can't wait to try some of these. Let's see . . . Lustrous Hair, Obnoxious Dogs, mmm, Unwanted Suitors . . . Oh here! Here's one that just might help poor Polly!"

I managed a sickly grin as they all turned to look at me, their eyes not quite so envious now.

"OK, now Fran, you stand here, and Beth, over there, see, like a triangle with Cynthia." Shannon moved quickly around the room. "Now, who's got the red felt pen?"

"Here!" Fran pulled it out of her shirt pocket.

"These three symbols." Shannon held up the book, showing it to each of them. "I'm not sure where . . . I guess your forearm would work. Or maybe the back of your hand. Yes, that's better, the hand I think."

The women passed the felt pen around.

"What about candles?" Cynthia asked. "Shouldn't we have the candles?" Shannon frowned, looking at the book. "It doesn't say."

"Oh, all spells are much stronger with candles, aren't they, Fran?" Beth asked.

Fran nodded tentatively. "Perhaps; the old books do mostly say a lot about candles."

"I'll just set them out, really quick," Beth assured the others.

After lighting the fat, black candles and placing them at equidistant angles from their three-point circle, Beth went back to her spot. Shannon nodded approvingly.

"Now," she said. "Polly, you stand here with me, in the centre. . . ." Winding her hands through the air over my head, Shannon began chanting. The words were unfamiliar, and she stumbled over the pronunciation. I stood perfectly still, watching Shannon's bracelets wink in the candlelight. This has to work, I thought.

Without warning, fierce white light flashed in the room, blinding us all. A loud bang cracked in our ears, and Shannon's television blew out, showering us with glass.

"I'll be your BAAABy tonight . . ." screeched the broken set in a horrible parody of Bob Dylan.

"Oh, no! The food is ruined! And I spent all day on that cheesecake." Fran turned accusing eyes on me.

“I got you babe . . . I got you and you got me,” the TV carcass wailed. Smoke curled out of its innards.

Their jealousy a forgotten aberration, the witches now stared coldly at me. Beth crossed her arms and tapped her foot, like a mother ready to levy punishment on a wayward daughter.

“Polly,” Shannon said quietly. “I just bought that set. It cost me 469 dollars.” Cynthia held up her Russian tea cakes with the glass slivers imbedded in them.

I felt myself shrinking under their glare and wished I could disappear into the floorboards.

“Uh, why don’t I just go? I’m so sorry about the TV, Shannon. And your cheesecake, Fran. All the food, the mess – “ I slunk to the door. “Sorry, really, so sorry . . .”

Outside, the cool night air bathed my flaming cheeks. How could I ever live this down? I’d ruined our New Moon Conclave, not to mention all the food. (And Shannon’s 469 dollars TV, my mind whispered ruthlessly.) Head hanging in disgrace, I hurried along the streets of the city, not looking where I was going, until the colourful glow of neon patterning the wet sidewalk caught my attention. I stopped. People pushed by me, going in and out of nightclubs, their happy, laughing faces making me ache with loneliness.

I wasn’t in the habit of going to bars. Especially lately, with my “little problem”. Spending too much time in a public place might invite the unwanted notice of surrounding machines. But a drink and a little anonymous company sounded pretty good to my bruised ego right now.

“Maybe it’ll be OK,” I told myself, hesitating outside a brightly lit doorway. Should I cross my fingers? Might as well, I thought as I pushed open the door – nothing else seemed to work.

Inside, the dark, smoky atmosphere wrapped itself around me, bringing the instant comfort and camaraderie only bars can offer to lonely people. Music blared from a raucous band on stage. Perfect, I thought. If machines started talking, no one here would hear them. I ordered a drink and carried it to a table near the back.

Left alone, watching couples twine and gyrate on the tiny dance floor, I finally admitted the truth to myself: I *was* horny. It had been almost six months since Harry left, and there’d been no one in all that time. I’d grown comfortable with Harry and his ways, even if he was a little, well, too tidy. OK, obsessively tidy. But we’d been happy. They say familiarity breeds contempt. In my case, I guess it bred carelessness. Harry caught me using a cooking spell one night. It was more than he could handle, and the next day

when I got home from work, his stuff was gone. Funny, though – he'd always raved about my cooking. Said it was some of the best he'd ever had. I raised my glass. "To Harry," I thought glumly, "the son of a bitch."

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I noticed a man sitting alone at the next table. Furtively, I stole glances at him. Though he was young and good-looking, with the kind of open, honest face that attracts me, he appeared about as glum as I was. Watch it, Polly, I told myself. Two lonely people in a bar – that's how trouble starts.

The music suddenly ceased, and the dancers dispersed to various tables. Still the man sat alone. I grew uneasy. With the music over, the machines in the bar might start claiming their passion for me. The closest one was a jukebox near the bathrooms. Perhaps I should move farther away.

"You hunka hunka burning love," a voice purred from the next table. My head whipped around in time to see the lone man slap his pants hard. He grinned at me weakly. Nervous, I turned away.

"Oh, baby, hold me tighter, let me be your love slave tonight." I ducked my head and peered through the curtain of my hair. I didn't see any machines around him. Maybe he had a pocket computer. Or a modular telephone. Surreptitiously, I stared.

"More, More! Give me more!" a female voice yelled.

The man groaned and slumped down in his chair, hiding his face behind his hands.

Something odd was going on here. A tingling ran up my spine, and on impulse, I leaned over.

"Excuse me," I hissed. "Excuse me, please." He peeked out from between his fingers.

"Did your pants just say something?"

His hands fell in his lap, and he sighed heavily. "Yes, I'm afraid they did." I grinned. Slipping into the chair next to his, I held out my hand.

"My name's Polly," I said. "And machines talk to me."

He sat up straight when he heard that, and his eyes got big. Deep blue eyes, with the most wonderful long, black lashes giving him a boyish look. His fingers tentatively grasped mine.

"Roger. And, uh, clothes talk to me," he said, blushing adorably. "Do your machines, do they, I mean, are they –?"

"Lewd, crude and downright rude? Yes."

Roger broke into a smile and he squeezed my fingers tighter. Something warm stirred below my belly button. My, he had a nice smile.

"Me, too. Then you're a . . . ?"

I nodded. "Witch. Yes. Cookie Coven." I rolled my eyes. "The name wasn't my idea, but we hold bake sales every couple of months to raise money for potions and things."

He pointed to his chest. "Warlock, fourth degree. Order Fox, Southside. We sit and argue about spells, mostly drink a lot of beer." He grinned, then shook his head. "They haven't wanted me around much lately. What do you think it is?"

"Power leak."

"Power leak – really?"

"That's what my Circle says. They scryed it."

He raised his eyebrows. "How long has it been going on for you?"

"About six months, ever since my last guy walked out. He was a normie. One little cooking spell, and bam, off he went, never looking back."

"And I bet in all that time, you haven't . . . ?"

I shook my head, dropping my eyes. Electricity rolled through his hand in waves. I hoped he wouldn't let go of my fingers.

He didn't. "Eleven months," he said softly.

My eyes met his. We grinned at each other like two foolish kids.

"Power leak, huh?"

"Yes," I said, and laughed softly, feeling his power pulsing against my palm.

"Then you and I, we're pretty – I bet we'd be – hey!" he said urgently. "You want to get out of here?"

"Thought you'd never ask," I replied.

As we threaded our way through the crowd, someone's discarded coat yelled out "Hip, hip hooray!", and others took up the cry. Roger drew me close, and we ran for the exit. As we hurried past the jukebox, it burst into a pompous, fevered rendition of the Wedding March.

That, I thought, was a little presumptuous.

But outside at last, Roger wound his fingers in my hair and kissed me, right there under the glittering neon. The thrill ran from my lips straight down to my toes, lighting fires all along the way. Nearby cars clapped wildly, and from the dainty hat of a small, white-haired lady shrilled a loud wolf whistle. Closing my eyes, I took my time returning the kiss.

After all, who was I to argue with power?



Growling of Shadows

by Nancy Bennett

A shadow by his side/armed black and tan. Watching. . .
Gentle stillness, ears alert/flush forward. Bladed
grass bending to each paw print.

He watches us all, audience-blending, seeking patterns in poppyseed faces
over and over

His mind tries to put a reason to our presence and
then there is one who steps out from the shadows, lurking ghoul

Waiting, watching, growling. . .

The commands soon spoken rip him into action.

Air filtering through the cheers, dropping the sinister force
to the ground like a shroud, he hears and obeys only what his master
thinks. . .

Taking down the bad guy never caring if he's
dressed in black, thin as air or only a shadow of evil.

Psychic teeth cut as close as diamond drills through the transparent
world.

K9 shadows the men with the guns, white teeth flash
the difference of good guy and bad guy resting
In someone else's thought waves.

MOTHER WAS CALLED LUNA

by Nancy Bennett

Mother, milky white and drawn like a nervous colt
would often bolt outdoors, tearing through the clover and scream
at the stars, for like her mother before her
she never felt safe, the shadows watched her, corralled her
In my crib, I would stare wide-eyed at the silver discs
surrounding my sky and listen to the music the clouds played. . .
It kept the cats away, lest they steal my breath, eerie howling through
the bars as mother cried to the stars.

Mother-life in cycles, weaving dark blue strings into cat's cradles
weaving the blankets to keep her dark-eyed offspring safe.

They called her Luna, her skin never bronzed like other earthly maidens
Who bolted windows and doors, ran into the fields and talked in strange
tongues

bore the alabaster daughter with the dark eyes, a weaver of star
fibres, strong enough to net the silver discs as they plummeted through
the cobalt sky, in search of greener pastures and thin legged nags.

Nancy Bennett is a Victoria poet and fiction writer whose work has appeared in dozens of magazines over the past few years. She has had poems in every issue of *TransVersions*, two of which received honourable mentions in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror 9*.

Kenneth McCool is a six foot tall, mighty-thewed artist from Leesburg, Virginia who lives mostly out of his car. In addition to *TransVersions* (see page 4 and the back cover), his work has been published in *The Silver Web*, *Fortress*, *Symphonie's Gift* and Weirdbook Press. Some of his work appeared in the *Art at the Mill Exhibit* in Millwood, VA.

BUG TOWN



URSULA PFLUG

Illustration © 1996 by Ursula Pflug

An accomplished artist as well as a respected writer of slippery tracts that ride the razor's edge between "literary" and fantastic fiction, Ursula Pflug currently has work in *Leviathan* #1, and forthcoming in *BBR* (two); *Freezer Burn*; *ON SPEC* (two); *The Peterborough Review*; and *Testament*. A contributing editor at *The Peterborough Review*, she is guest editing their upcoming *SEX* Issue.

Her magic realist novel, *Snake Station*, is forthcoming from Cider Press.

"Bug Town" is set in the same near future reality as "Version City" from the semi-legendary *Senary Magazine*.

The Bugtown nexus is a warehouse in the middle of a six block radius of evacuated Chinatown territory, full of shoestring insecticide operations and street vendors. Many of the Chinese left with the evacuation: Lee stayed, and some of his family and friends. It is my friend Jayne who asked me to describe them this way, more truthfully: "Why?" I say, "everyone trashes the Chinese."

"I know. I do it too. It's the stress. But you know it isn't really true, and there are, in any case, very few Chinese left to trash."

"It's just another way of dividing us."

"I know. But I'm afraid, too."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of Lee."

"Me too. And afraid of Bugtown. But why are we more afraid of Lee than of Max?"

"*Je ne sais pas*. But if we go, maybe we'll find out."



A lot of the buildings aren't on city plumbing any more and raw sewage runs down the streets, just a little worse than on our side of Spadina. Walking down those streets in the middle of the night you feel like you're in the third world; no, on another planet altogether. Mostly I can't afford to be too thin skinned, but Bugtown always makes my head spin. Why do they call it that? Ask Max; he named it himself, the night his little shop in the shadow of the Toshiba light board under the Gardiner exploded, and his face turned purple. Yeah, same accident.

In school we used to call him Blue Max. Not any more. The beginning and end of it all. Some people would have run when a thing like that happened, but not ol' Max. He could've got a job at the Proctor and Gamble labs, a new face, a house and a wife and a debit card, but he decided to stay down here with us, our only public servant.

The city sends a big load of Roach Motels and Black Flag and boracic acid and maybe even female roach pheromones on a really lucky month, but their shit don't do shit on our bugs. Maybe they're hoping if they leave us alone down here with ineffectual powders we'll come up with something on our own. Something they can swipe for themselves, take the credit, natch. Like everything they take of ours. Our music, our art, our clothes. We're like a little experiment for them, I think on the mornings when conspiracy theory looms large as the new cockroaches. Why they let us stay? An experiment in adaptation. Give people the most adverse living conditions possible, see what they come up with.

Mostly we come up with a life. I'd take the conviviality of the monthly neighbourhood dances, or the bike repair shop that doubles as a repertory cinema, any day over being locked in a box up there, staring at Superchannel, or whatever shit they've got spewing out of the box these days.

Max, one of their best and brightest, decided to stay. With us. He said it was the explosion that made him see things differently. He said it turned his head around. I'm beginning to think he meant it literally. I'm beginning to wonder what that explosion of wine coloured powder made him see.

Like I said, Max is our public servant. He took it upon himself to help us remedy the situation, having been in chemistry with me at McGill. Max, unlike me, drank like a fish even back then.

I miss him sometimes. I don't go over there much, because of what you hear. The newskids: teenagers who sell powders, working under Lee, doing street sales in the bars and cafes. Sleptalker, one of them, a friend of mine. Found dead in an alleyway last month – murder or suicide; no one's talking, least not yet.

A good kid; we talked often and went drinking a few times together, uncovering one another's secrets early in the whisky mornings. He had a fireworks concession. Made his own, too; measuring out saltpetre and magnesium on his sales table right on Spadina. You'd think nobody'd have time for luxuries like fireworks down here on the fringes of Chinatown, but it's more like the opposite. We make lots of art. And we dance. You know what they said about Damocles.

I miss Max's blue eyes, talking about the future. He was the big idealist. What if he is, still?

Well, I've seen the future, Max, and it crawls. Like tropical breeds, bigger. Some talk of a new strain, from the radiation. You hear these things. Is it true or urban legend? – who knows; they'd be the last to tell us. Max is a chemist, not a biologist, but he does keep a lot of bugs over there, in little aquariums, feeds them different coloured powders. They're beautiful, those powders, of every imaginable hue, and once every month or so a new one winds up on the street. The newskids who sell say it doubles as a drug, paint it on their skin, wait for it to come on, dance when it does. Never seen anything like those dances. People say, sometimes, at the end, they start fires and climb into them. Sometimes at the end there are dead; not just the burnt corpses, so lacking in dignity, but worse still, arteries slashed open with razor blades. Skin so young desecrated; I only saw it once, now I don't look any more, let others gather round staring when the ambulance circles.

What makes them do it? Or is it done to them? Not looking, I have no proof, no evidence, unlike the tiny greasy footprints on my kitchen counter, mornings I didn't scrub out the night's chicken pan.

Proctor and Gamble cancelled Max's job offer when they found out the explosion made him crazy. It gave him visions of the chemical chains for better powders, he said. Powders that worked. These things happen, he said, citing the famous case of the benzene ring. Maybe his idealism just changed, like his face, into something unrecognizable. Blue Max, newly Max Maroon, set up his new shop in an abandoned building on Huron Street, started mixing up batches. People don't go around there much; they say the air is so full of dust when Max is in production you get wired just walking down the street.



It was Tuesday night, I was out of powder; the street showed no sign of any sellers and so I was on my way to Max's shop, Jayne in tow. She wouldn't go there alone, she'd said. Didn't know Max like I did.

Tanya the newsgirl was sitting on a bench outside Max's building. You could tell they were working on Blue again, because in the glow of the sodium lamps blue dust was swirling out of the open windows, covering everything. Tanya sat with her eyes closed, her lips parted, a fine blue coating covering her skin, her clothing, every inch of her. Max in full production. Why didn't he let her in, I wondered? Not that she needed to go in. She had all she wanted here. Crazy Max must be more strung out than anyone. Maybe he knew she was wired by now, and he wouldn't let her deal any more, 'cause there wasn't any profit in it for him. It meant she might be about to explode.

Except that Max doesn't deal, Lee does. Public sentiment runs hot and cold against Lee; people blame him for the newskids' deaths but they continue to buy from him because Max's powders are the best, the only ones that really work. I don't like the racist comments I hear about Lee, even when I hear them coming out of my own mouth, but the truth is down here everybody gets called names: for their race, their gender, whatever they happen to be selling. Like the school yard: if you come home with anything less than a bloody nose you figure you're still ahead of the game.

I ran a finger through the dust on Tanya's nose. She didn't even blink. "Is she alive?" Jayne asked, in that sardonic way she has. We rang the intercom and someone buzzed us in.

In the hall leading to Max's shop a Chinese woman had a little booth selling last week's Orange. Cut rate: it probably had only had a few days left in it. Jayne paused, but I wanted the good stuff.

"Wait," Jayne said. "She's selling books, too."

“Books?”

She was, too. Laid out on the table beside the little twist-tied baggies of Orange were poetry chapbooks, a xeroxed copy of Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” and several copies of a story collection, entitled “Cockroach Culture”.

“Art out of life,” Jayne said, picking one up. “It seems so real.”

“Your posters are like that, too,” I said, complimenting her on them as I could never stop myself from doing. Jayne designed and printed posters for community dances; she ran an old offset in her loft. She had an orphaned laser printer too that still ran but said she preferred the Gestetner; the print quality was warmer, like vinyl sound. She had an uncanny eye for colour; I used to wonder where she got it, even worry; I knew she’d used more than once.

“Thanks,” she said. “They’re Cockroach Culture, too. Here’s to it; I like it better than the old one. Maybe if I have any money left I’ll get it on the way out. It’s not too expensive.”

“Printed on recycled stock.”

“Home-made recycled stock at that; only affordable paper still extant. I know; it’s my business.”

“Speaking of business. . . .”

We abandoned our browsing to visit Max. No one came to our knocking and the shop door was locked.

On the way back down the hall Jayne said, “You want to hear my secret fantasy?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you think you want to keep it to yourself?”

“I’ll tell you. I’d be Max’s girlfriend, lover, whatever. I could be strung out forever. I’d never run out. I could stay here like a pig in shit. Max is the big time, isn’t he?”

“Jayne, you scare me. If you got strung out you’d end up on the beach, cutting up your arms at some bonfire party.”

“That’s never been proven. Hey, looks like I get to buy my anthology after all.”

We each bought a baggy of Orange from the vendor and Jayne bought the book, too. “You buzzed us in?” she asked.

The woman pointed at the buttons on the wall behind her. “I do door for Max.”

“Oh, and he has an intercom in his room too and you tell him who it is?”

“Yes.”

“He must trust you a real lot.”

“I’m Lee’s sister.”

“That explains it then,” Jayne said wryly. “by the way, you know there’s a newsgirl sitting on the street bench? Only she isn’t doing much selling.”

The woman sighed and shook her head. "Tanya. I've been telling her for days to go home, get some sleep."

On the way down the stairs Jayne read to me: "*It is the disfigured face that heals us, the monster who kills our monsters for us, those we have created. Lee. I never told the truth about him, never told the truth about Chinatown. We look down on those who carry our pain for us, who wear the face we hide from the world. We have always done this.*"

"Strong stuff."

"It's true, isn't it?"

Too true, I thought. Like me when I don't think about the butcher at the abattoir, every time I take a bite of meat. Just so: we also don't think of razors and bonfires every time we buy powder that works. Max knows this too; it's why Lee sells for him, wholesaling to kids. To hide our own part in the newskids' pain we prefer to make racist remarks. But it's not because Lee is Chinese, but because of what he does, that we owe him. It is this debt which is too painful to acknowledge. Not acknowledging it, Jayne and I parted ways to our separate apartments to kill bugs, each of us quite alone.



Predictably, the Orange lasted all of two days. Once again, I walk those brown steps, his steps. Up, up, up: looking for Jayne who hasn't answered her phone in two days; not looking for Tanya, 'cause I know where she is. She's the known quantity, the one I can't retrieve. It's Jayne who stands on the border, has stepped across it once or twice, always come back. So far.

At the beginning I used to work with Max: factory help, powder production. And then I got tired. Tired of the sleepless nights, the beer, the coffee, the endless low-paid drudgery up and down those dusty stairs of my Chinatown youth. It was only two years ago but somehow it always feels I left my youth behind, there, with that job. When the kids started to get hurt I quit, figuring it was the least I could do.

But I still bought powders.

Max is crazy like they all say to let those kids slash themselves, or have it done, as some say, when they get too greedy, but nobody else is doing anything about the bugs. For the salvation we will not attempt ourselves there is always a price.

Carry a flashlight up the stairs, in case of one of the frequent power outages. Look for my face in Max's own. Dream a new game.

Green. Green of trees, not of powders.



Sleeptalker, listener. I dreamed of him last night. He spoke to me, saying, "Don't kill them, let them live." When I woke I said, in answer, "It's easy to be a Buddhist when you're not talking about foot-longs, and I don't mean hot dogs."

Not foot-long yet. But who knows what tomorrow will bring?

In my dream he wore ratty jeans and long, thin brown hair, just like in real life, just like in old photographs of us when we were in high school. Nobody listened to us then when we said the apocalypse was near and it looks like we were right.

Who is it we in turn aren't listening to now? Not forty yet, I still have a chance to do something. Some small thing. Save one life.



Tanya. I can mark the time by her colours; the layers of powder nicked away on her cheek where a candy wrapper or a dry leaf has blown against her immobile face.

I looked at her for a moment and went on, to the twenty-four-hour Mr Submarine on Spadina. I bought a large assorted which I somehow knew, don't know how, was the kind she liked. And a large bottle of Evian, although I'm sure she would have preferred Pepsi. I tried to give it to her but her hands remained clasped in her lap and so I set it down on the bench beside her. A shadow of a smile.

Rich blue and green layered in the folds of her clothing, iridescent peacock colours. Judging by the layers of colour she hadn't been home for a bath in-between, had sat here all week.

The green a pale green; a Day-Glow with white in it. I'm starting to sound like Jayne, like colours matter. Just as colours. I'd bought extra and stopped by her place on my way home. She was printing; the new posters were blue and orange, colours lush and familiar.

"I hope you feel good cutting those poor kids' arms and legs to ribbons," I said. "So when's the dance?"

"Saturday. You have such a perspective, Jack. So hip, so new, so now. It hasn't been proven. Maybe doing that is just what they do, nothing to do with the powders. How come we aren't doing it, is what I want to know? Not many reasons not to. The way I figure it, the whole ship is gonna be sunk any time now. So we might as well have fun. Cockroach Culture: the last people's culture. It gives a whole new meaning to the words 'save the last dance for me.'"

"Are the colours what I think they are?"

"Yes, as you probably guessed I'm using bug powders. Can't get hide nor hair of printer's ink any more, and I thought I'd give it a try. The last couple

of days of a powder run are never any good anyway, so everyone's got these little twist-tie baggies of colours lying around; happy to unload 'em to me for a song. Cheaper than printer's ink, in fact." She pushed the hair out of her face.

"So that's where you've been the last couple of days, is shopping for colours."

"Not that it's any of your business. Also I'm feeling very ecologically correct as they're water based. The colours might fade but who cares: this world will be gone by then."

"But at least you'll have left a slightly cleaner water table behind for the use of the survivors."

"Exclusively animal and vegetable."

"One would hope."

"No kidding, Jack."

Watching a really proficient woman work always gets my gonads going so after awhile I asked her if she wanted to go out for a few beers when she was done.

"Sure," she said, "but it's Tanya you should be asking out."

"Why?"

"She loves you."

"How d'you know?"

"She told me."

"Well, I like Tanya, Jayne, but she's trouble. She's an addict and you just have fantasies."

"Not for long."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Waiting to know."

"Know what?"

"Tell you sometime, later, not now."

While Jayne washed up and looked for her windbreaker I went and stood at the window. It was so dusty it was almost impossible to see out, but on the ledge stood three printed cards, side by side. Picture divided from caption by a thin dotted line: sun, sky, grass. Things we don't see much of around here. They were beautiful and the fact of their existence, the only decor in Jayne's completely functional shop and living space seemed to speak of a longing and vulnerability I never otherwise saw her betray. I felt like I'd uncovered a secret, although it wasn't anything she'd tried to hide. I turned the cards over; on the back was the English word for each picture, and beside it the Chinese ideogram. They were teaching cards, and yet the purpose she had put them to was quite different.

I could have razed her about it, but didn't; no one wants their shrines desecrated, especially when they only have such thin lonely ones. Let her

show me that side of herself when she was ready, if ever.

We went to the last Chinese grocery and bought home-made beer from under the counter, brown bagged it Montreal-style, wandering the alleyways. There were stars. It was very romantic.

"Hey Jack," she said, "I'll read to you out of this story collection. It's really awesome."

"Oh, right. That again. So read on: the last bit gave me enough to think about for a week."

"I have a new friend now; someone like Jayne, someone like Tanya. A friendship that makes me feel able to complete these stories I abandoned so many years ago for another kind of life. His name is Jack.

"We will squander our youth in the dark nights of the city, counting stars, like Max and I did that one night. Like holes in space, he said, space itself like the front of the little fifties bar in the booze can we went to: a sheet of metal with holes drilled in it, letting in tiny points of light like starlight from the light bulb behind it.

"The heavens a vast sheet of metal with drilled holes; if we ripped it away we'd find huge fluorescent tubes, or quartz halogen. Anyway a light too bright; it would make everything look white. This is why the holes are so tiny; it's only a small amount of light we can stand. Surely we need a new metaphor for the sky; it's about time we stopped talking about diamonds scattered on black velvet.

"There is a fable about loving too much, but I can't quite remember what it is. My first thought is Narcissus, looking into a still pond surrounded by green-stemmed white flowers, delicate and strong.

"And yet was that a story about love or self-obsession? Is that what I'm doing here, writing like this? Perhaps it is a story that needs to be written.

"Up up the dark wooden stairs to the sooty loft apartment where he worked. At a table red candles in old pewter sticks and an open chemistry book.

"Out his back window I looked out at the few mature hardwoods and felt communion with them, more intensely than I do in the country. Because of the contrast; because there are less of them. Because I haven't been to the country in years. I wonder if it's still there?" Jayne shut the book, put it in the back pocket of her jeans, looked at me, ironic and meaningful.

"He was writing about us," I said, "if the author's a he."

"What else is there to write about?" Jayne asked.

"Let's go home." I wanted to go to her place but huffily figured I wouldn't suggest it; she'd upset me with her talk of fantasizing about Max, her nonsense about Tanya loving me.

Was it possible?

On our way we passed her, still sitting under the light. The sandwich I

was glad to see was half eaten and neatly wrapped in several layers on the bench beside her, where the bugs couldn't get at it.

Gutter bugs, in summer.



Saturday afternoon. Every day I've brought Tanya a sandwich and water, but only today have I needed to go up the stairs. Max in his visor, working; Lee sitting at the table, smoking, reading a Chinese newspaper I'll never be able to understand, not in my whole life. Unless I ask him. Like Jayne's shop, too, the surface of the table littered with full ashtrays, empty styrofoam cups, looped brown rings of coffee. Yellow dust coating everything: the lab, the counter tops, the empty take-out food containers. I put my money on the table.

"Don't you guys feel bad?" I asked.

"Feel bad about what, Jack?" Max asked in that convivial way I was always so fond of in college. The way it could brighten a day.

Lee looked up from his paper, smiled hello.

"About the newskids, about Sleepwalker?"

"You don't buy from them any more, Jack," Max said, "How come? You've come straight to the factory every time this month. You better have a good reason; we don't let everyone in here, you know. It's only 'cause we're old pals."

Lee swung his legs, looking decidedly collegiate and unsinister. Not saying anything.

"It's cheaper," I lied.

"True, true."

Not saying: because I can't look at their hands any more. Because I stay away from abattoirs. Because I was afraid of both of you.

Because people died.

Lee got up and went to a shelf, handed me a newly bagged package of Yellow. "It's the first one with a name, not just a number," he said.

"What's it called?"

"Perilous Yellow," he said, as though that was very funny. I wondered how fast I could leave.

"About the other question," Max said.

I was already at the door, wishing I hadn't opened my mouth. "Yeah?"

"There's an answer to that question, but this isn't the day you get it."

I turned back, hesitantly. "When is?"

"The day you stop buying for good."

I left, my boots resounding on the dusty stairs. I could hear them laughing behind me.

The ventilator open as always and yellow dust swirling out, glowing like a cloud of gnats under the streetlight. She sat there, waiting for the Yellow

to coat her eyelids, enter her bloodstream through the skin. Like yellow eye-shadow.

I heard stapling and turned; Jayne was on the corner of Spadina, putting up her new posters. The stapling sounded angry.

"Jayne, hi."

"I didn't think much at the time, (bang) Jack, but you really got me mad. Who (bang) are you (bang) to talk about what I do? You support the deaths as much as I do, (bang) by supporting the industry. You could just let them live."

"That's what he said."

"Who?"

"Sleepwalker."

"Now you're dreaming about him. That's a beginning, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, I'll read. The book's by Sleepwalker, as you so obviously didn't notice. It's the details that count, Jack, the details. The details will save you."

"I didn't want to check the author's name at the time. I liked the anonymity of someone writing about me, someone I didn't know. But ever since then I've been wondering. I'd walk the street and everyone I saw, I'd wonder. I thought one day I'd find out, one day I'd talk to them about their stories, the ones I'm in."

"Too late. He's dead."

"Speaking still in dreams."

"And in stories he left behind."

"I wonder if he knew he'd die? If he wrote it to leave behind a part of himself?"

"Isn't that why anyone writes?"

"I wonder what he knew, that they killed him for?"

"Max, or Lee, or neither? Maybe he killed himself."

"I don't know."

"You should think about it. Listen, though. There's a bit about Chinatown. I haven't read it yet." Jayne took the book out of her pocket and opened it. I sat on the curb beside her and read over her shoulder. She turned the rough brown pages, always politely asking first to see if I was ready.

Before the evacuation when there were more of them, more of us, more people, aside from the young ones who were our friends and made us ginger tea when we had colds, the Chinese were inscrutable as the old cliché goes; divided from us by language and culture, seemingly having no interest in getting to know us better or else just busy with their lives. They said hello when we came into their restaurants, taking great pleasure as always in their food: mu shé pork and garlic eggplant.

I miss them, now that they're gone, miss the stores I loved, the toys, especially the mechanical metal chicken laying eggs, and the picture cards. The strangeness of an alphabet we could never hope to learn, it's form more like painting, like pictures than like words; this seemed to intimate something we did not have and by nearness would hope to absorb through osmosis. Also the imagery, not drawn in a traditional Chinese style at all: moons and dogs and flowers, sun, grass, sky, window; the western-style graphics were simple and beautiful and clear and while ostensibly to teach Chinese children or adults for that matter, English, to us they had another purpose. We took them home and shuffled them like oracles, laid them out in neat rows on shelves or windowsills: sun, sky, window; their images resonating with one another. Echo, palpation, vibration: they would assume a delphic aspect; like tarot cards from another planet we would hope to soak up some of the mystery of a different culture and learn about them and also as always, hoping to learn in the mirror of another something about ourselves.

As we sat reading the bugs came and began trying to eat the sweat from our sneakers; we moved up the block, to sit protected at Tanya's feet. I noticed someone had been there before us; at her feet lay a bunch of plastic paper-white narcissi, now turned into yellow daffodils, even the stems, the leaves.

Jayne said, "I didn't know anyone else did that."

"What?"

"The picture cards, as a tarot deck. I thought I was the only one."

"He knew so much about us," I said.

"He was one of us," she said, "how could he not?"

"Who will tell our stories now?"

"Will we stop killing them?" Jayne asked.

"I don't know. We have to see first."

"See what?"

"What happens to Tanya."

"It's all a circle, don't you see?"

"We're not immune."

"What does it matter – if he killed himself, if he was murdered. Either way it could happen to us. Don't you feel like suiciding, living as we do?"

"No sign of razor marks on Tanya's arms yet. Good-bye Tanya, I'll be by tomorrow." I kissed her on the forehead. Jayne snickered.

We walked. Jayne said, "I never believed the colours were so bad. I believed, secretly, the way you believe things when you're a child, that they were a doorway. The powders would show you a different way to live. It was the contrast that made them suicidal. Coming down they'd see this," she pointed at the sluggish contents of someone's toilet rising from a storm

sewer, “and the pain of it, compared to the beauty they’d experienced, was what made them do it.”

Jayne in her scraggly brown hair and dirty ink-stained coveralls made me so hot I barely heard what she said but I knew that was unfair and tried hard to concentrate.

“Why does Sleepwalker tell us not to kill them?” I asked, knowing it was important.

“Because it’s not our work.”

I realized she was leading me toward the dance hall, in the old temple on Cecil.

We went in, while Jayne read: *“I dreamed we moved to the islands in the harbour. I saw a houseboat whose top was made of a camper/trailer and something else beneath the sleeper overhang; a small greenhouse perhaps. A young woman in iridescent blue and purple clothes steered the boat down the lagoon, and suddenly I realized it was Tanya.”*



At the dance Max was there, and Lee. All our friends; most of the newskids. No Sleepwalker. No Tanya.

I watched how Max and Lee stayed separate, giving the lie to the camaraderie I’d witnessed in the factory. I watched how in their glances people honoured one and hated another, and thought: but doesn’t everyone know they are one and the same?

Can’t they see?

Jayne and I stayed away from the gossip and the rumours, dancing only with one another, resting on the stage to read from Sleepwalker’s book. It was as though we had new eyes. I looked out the window at the full moon and worried.

It rained sporadically throughout the night. I worried about Tanya, thought often I should go back and get her, save the one life. But then Jayne was stroking my hair and whispering sweet nothings. As she said, there’s no proof. Am I responsible for another’s life, even one who seeks her own undoing? I guess a part of me wanted to see. But I still felt bad.

We had a fun night. Jayne’s right: Cockroach Culture is better than the one that went before. Except for the cockroaches. The fires. The razor blades. The deaths; among them, rumoured or real, one true one, one I called friend.

But that’s not much, really, is it? Compared to everything else, I mean.



After the dance, in the bits of sleep arranged like small still ponds in our first sweet night of lovemaking, I dreamed of Sleepwalker again.

His story was in the dream too, and the picture of Tanya it had conjured in my mind. And Sleepwalker spoke again, over my shoulder as I read his words.

This is the woman to ask about how to live.



It's always after a dance they do it, people say; always after it rains, after a full moon, after a new colour hits the streets.

We'd had all four.



It was very early morning when I got up, to go to Chinatown, alone.

Tanya wasn't on her bench.

On a hunch I took the ferry to the island. I went to Snake Island first, I don't know why. Maybe because I used to go there when I was young, camp and party with my friends all night long.

On a path I found a bunch of plastic flowers, tied in string, rain washed and white again. I continued walking until I came to a campsite in a clearing. Tanya sat, drying her sneakers on two sticks over a fire. The fire worried me, but she looked quite sane. I tried for the jocular approach.

"You're safe around fires now?"

"Always have been, Jack. It was your fear that prevented you from seeing me."

"These yours?" I offered her the flowers.

"Oh, thanks, I thought I'd lost those."

"Jayne said it was a circle. Sleepwalker's stories, Max, Lee, the bugs. Does he talk in your dreams, too?"

"He talks to me all the time, not just in my dreams. You can do it too; you just have to listen."

"I guess. You know, he gave me a home-made Roman candle once. We set it off together, four in the morning, middle of Spadina."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah. And you said: 'Sleepwalker, you're the only one I know who can make the stars bloom.'"

"I said that?"

"He told me. He loved you, Jack. A better line than you usually come up with. Like something he might've said. Or written. So why you here, Jack?"

"To bring you your sandwich."

She smiled and took it, went back to toasting her shoes. I noticed she'd finally bathed, and only a few glints of colour remained in her blonde hair.

"It'll taste better than those."

She smiled, reluctantly examined the sandwich. "There's meat in it."

"Yes."

She took a bite. "We can never be blame free, no matter how much we do. But we still have to leave."

"To come here?"

"Leave in our heads. Leaving physically is good, too. I won't be able to stay; I was just getting sick of raw sewage. The boat isn't finished yet; we all take time off newsing to come down here and work on it. Sleptalker says that as long as we kill the bugs we're doing their work. The people who made it this way. Who made the bugs grow, with their poisons. It's not because of the powders that teenagers kill themselves, but because of the world. Why are any of us still alive? Those kids' deaths are just a way to make us feel guilty, immobilize us. The powders are the only thing we have. Too bad it's also a way for them to get us to clean up their mess."

"So?"

"So that's the fable about the people who love too much."

"What?" I took a bite of her sandwich, thinking it really was time to be a vegetarian again. Although it tasted good.

"Us. We clean up after them, with our thoughts, with our guilt, with our powders, even our deaths, our deaths most of all. Loving even them, forgiving even them. They'll make us do it forever. Too much love."

"So what should we do?"

"One thing at a time." She led me to a clearing in the trees. Sleptalker hadn't seen a place like this, for years before he died.

Through the stands of birch I saw a houseboat, parked in the lagoon. It was built entirely out of junk, had a container garden and a satellite dish on the roof.

"Not only that," she said.

"Not only?"

"There's no bugs. We shouldn't kill them, because they're alive like we are, but we shouldn't have to live with them either."

"Then what should we do?"

"Exodus."

"Where to?"

"We'll think of it along the way. We'll build it along the way. We have his stories now to show us the way."

"Sometimes I think I'm going crazy."

Tanya laughed, reaching as though across dream space to stroke my cheek with fingers that felt unusually warm. "Does it matter? How can dreams be any less reliable a guide than anything else? Than them? Desire or so-called reality; which will you choose?"

"Why couldn't they just do it quietly, jump in front of a subway or something, like a normal person?" Fires and razor blades made me more than squeamish.

"When's the last time you saw a subway, Jack?"

"True. But even still."

"Even still if you're going out why not go out burning?"

"I'd never thought of it that way." She was the first person I'd heard speak with any kind of inner authority for years. It was compelling, but I worried; perhaps all crazy people did that. And yet we heard the same voice, dreamed the same dreams. It filled a longing so old I'd no longer known I'd once had it. Till she'd reminded me: beautiful, scary Tanya. "I really do think I love you, Tanya." I did, too. It was almost frightening; she was so weird.

"It's about fuckin' time."

She hugged me and a little colour passed from her hair to mine. I waited in vain for the buzz but it was hard to tell, what with standing in a sun-dappled glade with a beautiful, if possibly demented woman, a vision of the future parked in the lagoon.

"Actually," she said, licking my lip, "the powders don't do anything."

"Now what?" I sounded so smart this morning but Tanya didn't seem to mind.

"It's a metaphor."

"Oh, of course."

"It's the last story. You'll understand when you read it."

"Maybe they work on other people, just not on you."

"Not on me, not on Sleptalker. You're getting warmer, Jack."

I raised my hands up to touch my face, to wonder at skin that had been cold, it seemed, for years. She was right. ❖

Continued from page 33
that has ever hit the cinematic mainstream. Bravo for Cronenberg.

Almost as amusing as the controversy that has been ingeniously created around the film, is the fact that almost no one has seen through the smoke and mirrors to perceive that this film is, at its heart, a satire – albeit, one where everyone else in the audience is taking the film so deadly seriously. Anyone who gets the joke is afraid to laugh for fear of being driven out of the theatre for a public stoning.

Favourite moments: 1) three strangers are sitting on a couch watching gut-wrenching car crash footage, when as gracefully as syn-

chronized swimmers, they each reach into their neighbours' laps; 2) an almost slapstick "erotic" sequence featuring James Spader and Patricia Arquette in a permanent full body appliance which makes her look like a Borg; 3) a scene featuring a small dog and a big man in falsies and a blonde Jayne Mansfield wig which would have been hilarious if it hadn't been at the centre of an enormous vortex of carnage. These are the sorts of juxtapositions Cronenberg delights in.

I don't think *Crash* is one of Cronenberg's best films, but it is sly and intelligent has to rank as his most successful. ❖

– Movie Review by DLSproule

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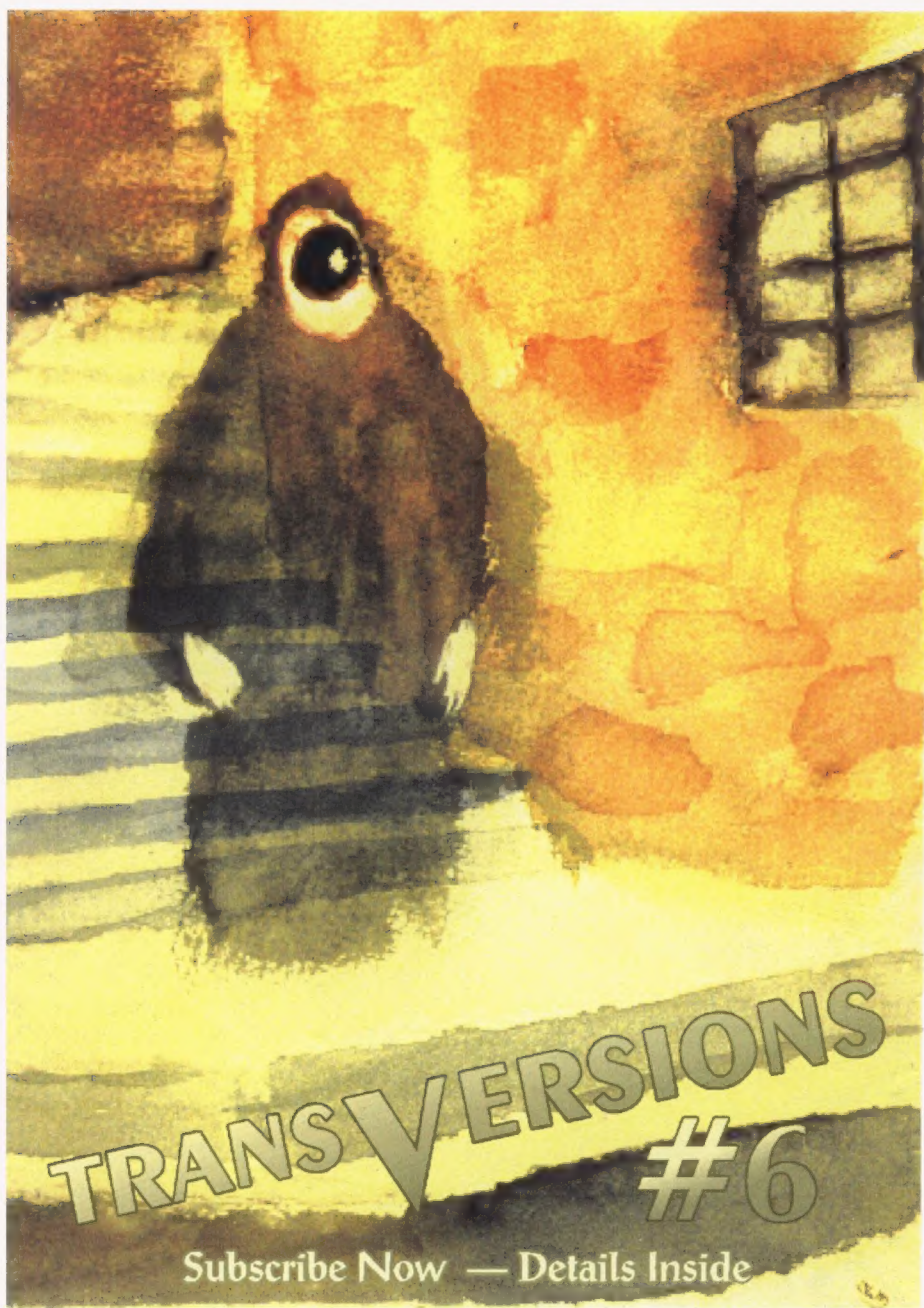
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